

Core i7: Speedy! Pricey! Worth It? pg 77

PC GAMER

THE WORLD'S BESTSELLING PC GAMES MAGAZINE



COVER TITLES
ARE CLICKABLE!

LEFT 4 DEAD

WE PLAYED. WE SLAYED. THE PC GAMER REVIEW

PREVIEWED

Dawn of War II
Batman: Arkham Asylum
Wanted: Weapons of Fate

REVIEWED

Call of Duty: World at War
Tomb Raider: Underworld
Quantum of Solace

JANUARY 2009 • NO. 183

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DISC EDITION

CLICKING A TITLE TAKES YOU DIRECTLY TO THE ARTICLE

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PLEASE NOTE

Screen shots and other artwork in this pdf have been downsampled and compressed. For the most accurate representation of game artwork please refer to your hard copy of PC Gamer.



GOING FOR THE GOLD

Perhaps you are familiar with the saying, "The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry." Or, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Or, "You really stepped in it, buddy."

Some 9 months ago, we published a definitive *PC Gamer* reviews policy. It pledged that we would review only finished game code; that said game code would be from the gold master version the publisher uses to create the discs that end up in retail boxes or the equivalents; that MMO and multiplayer-only games would be reviewed in a setting that replicates the consumer experience; and that as such, we'd only review MMOs and MP-only games when we could play them against the general populace.

We have adhered to every letter of this reviews policy. And do you know what we've discovered?

It totally doesn't work.

Waiting for master discs and the opportunity to play an MMO against the rest of the world is making it almost impossible for us to get you reviews you can actually use to make decisions about what games to buy—the time it takes a publisher to replicate the discs and ship them to stores is so short, there's not enough time for us to see the code in between. As a result, we feel like the quality of *PC Gamer* is suffering. Our job isn't to just info-dump details onto you, but also to show you a good time. Doing that well means taking the time to craft our stories, and

we can't do that when we're making eleventh-hour adjustments because a disc didn't show up. In most cases, the difference between "finished code" and "gold master" is just Games for Windows certification, anyway.

So, let it never be said that I don't own up to my mistakes. We're tweaking the policy so we can get the best information to you in the timeliest

manner: *PC Gamer* will only review finished game code,

meaning code that the game's developer has deemed

finished and reviewable, and we will review

MMO and multiplayer-only games in a setting

that replicates the consumer

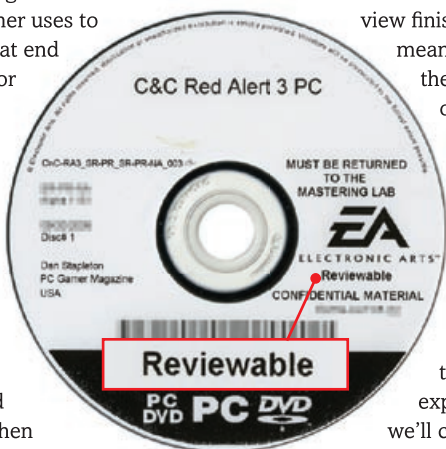
experience, which we'll create, if we

have to. Developers have no incentive to give us

unfinished code and call

it finished—after all, we'll continue to harsh on any problems we find, and we do not re-review games. And, as we learned while reviewing *Left 4 Dead* this month, you don't need to play a multiplayer game with unseen strangers to find out if it's a good game—you just need to create a situation that replicates the one you'd get at home.

/// That means go. ///



Kristen

/// KRISTEN SALVATORE,
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF ///

▶ THE PLAYLIST 0109

■ KRISTEN SALVATORE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



There are two ways to play a game like *Fallout 3*: you either career through the main quest as quickly as possible, then go back and do all the side quests, or you meander through the Wasteland making slow headway but uncovering every nook and cranny. At this rate, I'll be playing through New Year's.

■ LOGAN DECKER EXECUTIVE EDITOR



Left 4 Dead Space.

LOL!

(Do I still have a job?)

■ DAN STAPLETON REVIEWS EDITOR



Even after my second playthrough, I refuse to crack open the office copy of the *Fallout 3* Game Guide, or as I call it, the Big Book of Spoilers. There's still a ton of stuff I haven't gotten to do yet, I'm not ready to stop exploring. The only thing that can compel me to leave the wasteland is the siren call of *Left 4 Dead*.

■ EVAN LAHTI ASSOCIATE EDITOR



My proudest moment in *L4D's* versus mode: punching Dan's three AI teammates off a roof as the Tank (humming the *Three's Company* theme all the while), incapacitating him, lighting myself on fire, and leaping off the roof in a blaze of suiciding zombie glory. Oh, undead antics: you complete me.

■ DAN FITZPATRICK LEAD DESIGNER



With the kids' Pinewood Derby coming up, I'm considering the relative merits of graphite vs. teflon powder, tungsten vs. lead weights and whether to tilt the axles. Of course, it's not about winning, it's about having fun! Now where did I put that \$89.95 Super Speed Kit with the laser wheel alignment tool?



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LETTERS

YOUR LETTERS WILL BE DELIVERED BY HORDES OF UNDEAD POSTAL WORKERS. BRING 'EM ON!

E-mail us at letters@pcgamer.com or write to us at PC Gamer Letters, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080.



/// If you know where to look, the 10-year-old *South Park* game can be found for a song. [Suggested song: "What Would Brian Boitano Do?"] ///

PARTY LIKE IT'S 1999

At the last LAN party I attended, several of us 30-something gamers lamented the inability to find a copy of the *South Park* game by Acclaim from 1999. It does not seem to be available for sale anywhere, and GOG.com doesn't have it (although I added it to their wish list). We would love to resurrect this game at our next LAN

Amazon search turns up 23 affiliate sellers for the *South Park* game, with prices starting at one cent (plus shipping). That price sounds about right to us, considering it scored a catastrophic 40 percent in our June '99 issue.

DEAD-SYNC

I greatly enjoyed the *Dead Space* review, and it seemed to be fairly balanced in its

party, even if it wasn't the greatest game ever. Add a keg and you've got some zany yellow snowball multiplayer madness! Where's a gamer to turn to buy copies of a game this old?

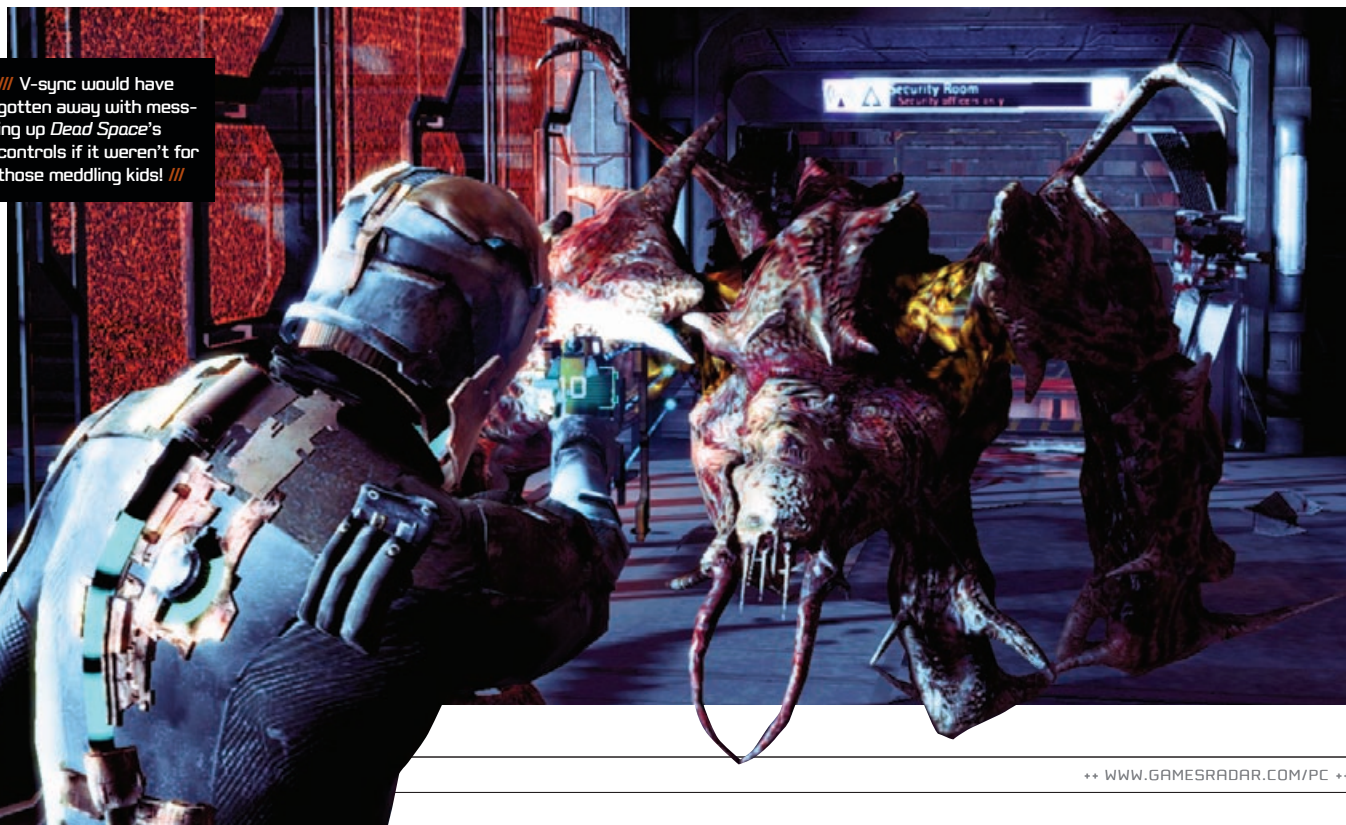
JEFF LEWIS

Digging through bargain bins for ancient and obscure gaming relics from the historical period known as the "late 1990s" can make you feel like an anthropologist, but sites like eBay and Amazon are a gold mine. A quick

assessment. One of the things that stood out to me, however, was the mention of "bizarrely sluggish mouse movement." Stuff like that can make or break a purchase. Fortunately, when I played, someone decided to turn off V-sync in the graphics settings (which is usually off by default, but in *DS* it's on). To everyone's surprise, the mouse control problem disappeared entirely. In light of this discovery, would you be willing to re-assess *Dead Space* after playing with V-sync turned off? HB CURLY

*It is our policy not to re-score games. It sucks for games like *Dead Space* that have easily fixed bugs on release, but the thought of having to re-review a game every time a patch comes out or someone finds a work-around makes our heads depressurize. The bottom line is that anyone who buys *Dead Space* off the shelf and installs it is going to have a hard time with the controls—and the last place they're going to think to look to fix it is the V-sync option. If a game doesn't work right on default settings, we consider that game to be at least a little broken. Besides, it's hard to feel too bad for *Dead Space*, considering that even with that issue working against it we still gave it an "excellent" 81% score in our Holiday issue.*

/// V-sync would have gotten away with messing up *Dead Space's* controls if it weren't for those meddling kids! ///



++ WWW.GAMESRADAR.COM/PC ++



/// Even though the United States is the best country ever, and no one would want to play as anyone else, *Empire: Total War* allows you to conquer the world as any country you want (even crappy ones). ///

THIS MONTH'S FUN FACT

DIGITAL DISCOUNTS

I can't quite understand why digital purchases from services like Steam, Direct2Drive, Impulse, EA Downloader, etc., cost so much. I understand that it is the same price to purchase the game from a store, and that we are paying for convenience, but have the gaming companies forgotten about what they aren't paying for? Distribution costs are greatly reduced—there are no boxes or manuals to print, and no trucks to ship them around. The real issue here, for me, is that if it costs less to supply a game digitally than it does at a retail store, I think some of those savings should be passed on to us, the gamers. I'm not going to fantasize about a company truly passing on all of their savings—business is business and I would be doing the same thing in their place. But if enough gamers made some noise about it, perhaps things would change. MICHAEL F. ENOS

According to the rules of capitalism, something is worth whatever people are willing to pay for it. For decades, gamers have demonstrated that they are willing to pay \$50 for a game; therefore, a game is worth \$50. So, if developers and publishers can figure out a way to more efficiently deliver the same gaming experience, aren't the savings rightfully theirs? Philosophy aside, though, the reason publishers won't offer digitally distributed games for less is that if they did, they would anger the retail stores that still account for the vast majority of their sales. The retailers wouldn't bother to stock those games, and publishers would be up a creek. Give it a few years for digital distribution to overtake retail, and you'll start to see some online price wars heat up.

BORED OF THE USA

Can we have a *real* game about the Imperial age now? When *Age of Empires III* came out and was completely and solely about North America, I endured. When *Civilization IV: Colonization* came out and was still all about America, I still endured.

Now comes *Empire: Total War*, a game that was born of developers outside this western obsession, and I thought the rest of the world (and by that, I mean the countries and continents south of the Tropic of Cancer that were exploited by the Northern Empires) would finally get some love from the gaming industry. I was wrong. From the gameplay footage, it is clear the map from the "Americas" campaign was recycled, and from what I've heard of the theaters of war, Africa will be mostly overlooked as well. Couldn't Creative Assembly actually be *creative* and ignore the beaten path? Why make the game solely about the country that mattered the *least* for Europe when they could as easily make it part of the game, not the center of it? Couldn't they enlighten gamers with historical tips about places they actually don't know?

I'm sure the game is still great and I'm

still excited about naval battles, but as someone who isn't from the States and who has some historical knowledge, this all manages to make me enjoy the game less than I could have. RAFAEL CALHEIROS

The way Empire: Total War has been presented to us, it looks as if the Americas campaign map isn't the centerpiece of the game, but a part of the whole. Creative Assembly just likes to tout it around here because, while the TW series is a certified hit in Europe, it's not quite a mainstream success on this side of the Atlantic. Remember: just like a non-American like you has trouble getting excited about playing as Americans, Americans have trouble getting into playing as Europeans. Everyone loves to root for the home team, after all. But the Americans are just one of the many factions you can play as in Empire, and the Americas are just one of the theaters. (And, in CA's defense, how do you not recycle the maps? There hasn't been a lot of continental drift in the past couple hundred years.) In addition, given that each recent Total War game got an expansion pack, we'd put money on another theater opening up a year or so after Empire comes out. ☒

WIN A COPY OF LEFT 4 DEAD



You knew this day would come: the zombie outbreak is upon us. Check your supplies! Shotgun? Check. Pistols? Check. First aid kit? Check. Copy of *Left 4 Dead*? What? You don't have one? This is bad, this is very bad. OK, stay calm, we can fix this. Read the review on page 30, then enter our random drawing to win one of ten copies of *Left 4 Dead* from Valve's secret stash. E-mail Contests@pcgamer.com with "Zombie Apocalypse" in the subject line, and include your full name and mailing address in the message body. Contest ends January 20, 2009. You must be 17 to win an M-rated game. See full contest rules on page 95.

EYEWITNESS

SPORE: THE BACKLASH

WHAT PUBLISHERS—AND GAMERS—CAN LEARN FROM THE ROCKY LAUNCH OF *SPORE*

After eight years of anticipation, PC gamers got a surprise along with their boxed copies of *Spore* last September: the game's license—enforced by EA's activation servers—limited each purchased copy of the game to three installs. After that, gamers would have to contact EA customer service for additional activation privileges, which were to be authorized "on a case-by-case

basis." Even worse, EA provided no way for installs to be de-authorized on a PC, so you couldn't "move" an install from one computer to another without using up one of your three installation privileges.

If the license agreement was harsh, so was the backlash. Within weeks of the game's launch, thousands of gamers had registered their displeasure with the policy by giving *Spore* one star on Amazon.com—the lowest possible rating.

Anger and pie-throwing on both sides continue to this day. Despite the one-star rating campaign, *Spore* has sold over two million copies since its release. And, in spite of the activation limits and the inclu-

sion of SecuROM copy protection on the disc, *Spore* nonetheless debuted not on store shelves, but on Bittorrent trackers four days before the game's official launch, and is said to have been downloaded through that peer-to-peer network more than any other game in history.

With both sides able to claim both victory and defeat, what, if anything, can gamers and publishers learn from the fracas?

THAT'S WHAT WE ASKED Randy Stude, director of the Gaming Program Office at Intel and president of the PC Gaming Alliance, who was quick to point out that

"without adequate protections in place, PC game developers will not be able to make money." But after this brief industry boilerplate, he acknowledges that "EA, like many other loyal PC game publishers, is still learning how to deliver actively managed digital rights in a fair manner. They heard the complaints and are making adjustments. Don't forget—there was a much louder and more substantial backlash against Steam when it first launched alongside *Half-Life 2*. Most PC gamers readily accept Steam's approach at this point."

Unlike EA's Frank Gibeau, who told MTV's games blog, "We assumed that consumers understand piracy is a huge problem," Stude is far from resentful about the gamer backlash. "I believe the efforts by the...people who voiced their opinions about SecuROM and the implementation method that EA decided to take created the awareness necessary to force change, as well as a healthy debate. You might call the

Some gamers had a beef with EA.



A SPORE ANTI-DRM PLAYER BESTIARY

1 (Opposite page)

Creature: Donald Ronald Sop
Creator: Firethorne
Description: "The Donald Ronald Sop, or DRM for short (Huh? – Ed), is an incredibly stupid creature that should be wiped from the face of the Earth."

2 Creature: Anti-DRM
Creator: GreatWhiteNorth
Description: "Because EA fails."

3 Creature: SecuROM Killer
Creator: Shadow-dragon
Description: "This creature's whole purpose of existence is to kill SecuROM, and possibly annoy any CEOs from that company that he finds."

4 Creature: EA Games 2
Creator: zwarrior
Description: "Hear no complaints."

5 Creature: eyePod
Creator: LoweKey
Description: "DRM is for freaks of nature."

Amazon one-star campaign the equivalent of a Boston Tea Party where PC gamers stomped their feet and said "No more!"

Brad Wardell, CEO of Stardock—a developer and publisher well-known for not including digital rights management (DRM) software on its games—told *PC Gamer* that while the company is not "anti-DRM" (Stardock's utilities, for example, do use online activation), heavy-handed copy protection and licensing policies may be inadvertently driving gamers toward piracy. Wardell says that publishers ought to apply a "litmus test" for their copy protection systems: "Will [it] cause legitimate users to feel like chumps for having bought the game instead of pirating it? If I install a game on my home machine, work machine, and my laptop, and I'm the only user, I should be able to do that without a hassle, ever. I don't mind entering in a CD key. I do mind being told I need to call someone and beg for another activation on something I bought when I know I could have tormented a pirated copy."

Wardell also suggests that publishers begin to consider smarter activation policies. "If you're trying to stop online piracy, why not look at the *location* more than the *number* of activations. So if I install it in Germany and Australia and USA on the same day, you know it's been pirated. If I install it six times on the same machine on the same day, it hasn't been pirated."

ULTIMATELY, EA INCREASED the number of activations permitted from three to five before you must contact the High Council customer service, and EA has stated that it plans to allow gamers to reclaim their activations when the game is uninstalled. (The company did not respond to *PC Gamer's* questions by press time.) But it clearly didn't have to happen the way it did. As Stude puts it, "There needs to be an environment that listens to legitimate consumers and doesn't make them feel like criminals for wanting to own a game and install, uninstall, re-install on their PCs today, tomorrow, and long into the future."

SECUROM: OK TO HATE

Because the technology has evolved over the years as hackers crack one iteration after another like so many walnuts, there's plenty of confusion about what SecuROM actually is and does.

SecuROM drops encrypted files onto your PC that allow the system to determine whether or not a game disc is authentic. Publishers may also use the software to communicate with remote authentication servers to activate—and track activations of—a game. It's important to understand that SecuROM is not a "rootkit," and as such it can't take over your

PC and lock itself in a virtual panic room when you try to uninstall it.

However, gamers should be concerned that it does not inform you that it is installing software on your PC or ask your permission to do it, and that software is not removed when the game is uninstalled. That should make you a little nervous, especially because SecuROM was developed by Sony DADC—the same company that really did include a rootkit on its audio CDs and then sneered at consumers when they objected.

SECURITY FAIL

Despite several levels of copy protection, *Spore* has nonetheless been pirated more than any game in history. But EA shouldn't feel bad—it's merely contributing to a rich tradition of epic security disasters going back through time.



THE HORSE IS A LIE

After ten years of war, the Trojans were delighted to find that their mortal enemies had decided not to invade the city and instead left a gift of a giant wooden horse as a sort of apology for being jerks. The Trojans dragged it inside the city walls and woke up that night drowning in their own blood.

HE'S NOT JUST THE CEO

In order to demonstrate his confidence in Lifelock's personal fraud-protection services, CEO Todd Davis created advertisements that prominently displayed his Social Security number (457-55-5462). A grateful Texan used the number to take out a \$500 loan from an online payday loan service—in Davis' name.

THANKS FOR SHOPPING

Despite an alarm system, surveillance cameras, round-the-clock guards, and electronically keyed vaults, thieves emptied 123 of 160 vaults in the cellar of the Antwerp Diamond Center, pulling off the largest diamond heist in history without using weapons, explosives, or even breaking a single lock.

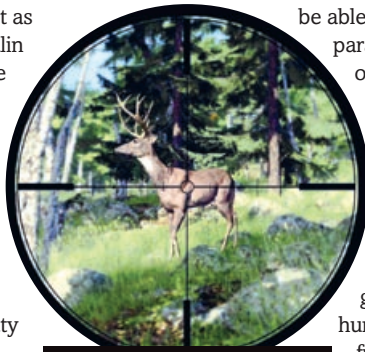
A VOTE OF NO CONFIDENCE

After Diebold boasted to state and federal authorities that its electronic voting machines were "unhackable," security experts noted that a picture of the key needed to open the e-voting machines was made available on the Internet, where it could be—and was—successfully duplicated from the image. The source of the image? Diebold's own website.

SPLAT AND CHAT

■ SOCIAL NETWORKING MEETS SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

We love hunting just as much as Sarah Palin does, but let's face it: most hunting sims look so bad, they're like taking buckshot in the eyes. Thanks to the folks behind *Just Cause*, however, you'll soon be able to play a hunting sim that uses the same engine as that phenomenally pretty game. For free. And with social networking features.



/// Say yer prayers, varmint. ///

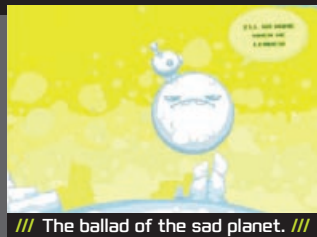
The Hunter will feature the usual suspects: deer, birds, even bears sniffing around dry leaves and pine cones just waiting to be properly dispatched. And as expected, you'll

be able to choose weapons and paraphernalia before setting out on missions to bag specific animals. But you'll also be able to build a Facebook-like hunting profile where you'll detail your kills, post bragging screenshots of the mounted heads of your prey, invite people to go on hunts, challenge other hunters, and gather a friends list full of hunting buddies with whom you can swap stories of your epic courage. Could *The Hunter* be the next wave in social networking? After all, friends who slay together, stay together. Sign up for the beta at www.thehunter.com. ☒

INDIE MINUTE

AETHER

A lonely boy and his pet monster set out to find friends in outer space by latching onto clouds with the monster's tongue and swinging until propelled into orbit. You'll visit five different planets to solve five different puzzles, and the one constant across the



/// The ballad of the sad planet. ///

different worlds is that almost every character you meet is by turns miserable, angry, or as lonely as you. By solving puzzles, you restore color to these melancholy worlds. Romantic and sad, and best of all,

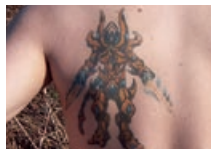
it's from the creators of *Gish*. Free at <http://armorgames.com/play/2153/aether>. ☒

BODY MODS ■ GAMERS SHOW OFF THEIR NEW SKINS

Having ink-filled needles stabbed repeatedly into your arm, leg, or back until your dyed wounds depict a sprite or logo that an overworked game artist probably spent a few crunch-time afternoons on: good idea? No less so than any other tattoo, really. Games aren't exactly a fad, and some classics will never die. It's just a question of what emblem you choose, where you put it, how much of your flesh you allow it to monopolize, and whether anyone will care about the game in 30 years' time. Here's a gallery from the hardest of the hardcore fanboys and girls of PC gaming. ☒



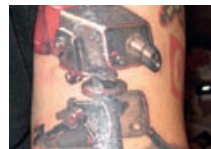
UNCHAINED MEMORY
What is it: the chain tattoo seen on protagonist Jack's wrists in *BioShock*.
Geek appeal: high. Jack's tattoos are a subtle element of the game, but tie into the plot.
Mainstream appeal: poor. Suggests a bondage fetish. Not that there's anything wrong with that.
Probability of regret in old age: 40%. They're relatively small and unspecific.



HE'S COVERING YOUR BACK
What is it: a *Starcraft* Protoss dude.
Geek appeal: high. The Protoss are the geeks of *Starcraft*, and *Starcraft* is the geek of the genre.
Mainstream appeal: poor. Obvious game/comic reference, thus intensely nerdy.
Probability of regret in old age: 65%. The art is colorful and specific, which are both risky.



QUAKEBACK MOUNTING
What is it: *Quake II* logo.
Geek appeal: medium. It's certainly geeky, but *Quake II*? Really? *Quake I* or *III*, sure, but *II*? With that pistol?
Mainstream appeal: medium. Luckily, the *Quake II* logo looks like an abstract tattoo anyway.
Probability of regret in old age: 75%. *Quake II* hasn't aged as well as the other *Quake* games.



A WELL-ARMED SENTRY
What is it: Team Fortress Level 1 Sentry.
Geek appeal: high. We love those little killing machines.
Mainstream appeal: high. Everybody loves a mounted turret.
Probability of regret in old age: 65%. If Valve ruins *Team Fortress 2* somehow, this will evoke extremely painful memories.

RELEASE METER 1308

WHAT YOU'LL BE PLAYING

A new year demands new games and 2009 promises to deliver them by the sackful—not like that cheapskate Santa who stopped bringing presents after I graduated from high school. If your New Year's resolution is to refine your shooter skills, keep an eye out for *Battlefield Heroes* or *The Agency* early in the year. Codemasters wants to quench your bloodlust and your thirst for knowledge with its mythology-themed action-RPG, *Rise of the Argonauts*. If you can't pick just one, Stardock's *Demigod* may be your best choice with its blending of action, strategy, and role-playing elements.

Q1 2009

Street Fighter IV	Capcom
Rise of the Argonauts	Codemasters
Puzzle Quest: Galactrix	D3 Publisher
Battlefield Heroes	EA
Dragon Age: Origins	EA
The Godfather II	EA
The Lord of the Rings: Conquest	EA
Mirror's Edge	EA
The Sims 3	EA
Battlestations: Pacific	Eidos
Blood Bowl	Focus Home Interactive
Dungeon Hero	Gamecock
Velvet Assassin	Gamecock
Pro Evolution Soccer 2009	Konami
Empire Total War	Sega
The Agency	SOE
Demigod	Stardock
Company of Heroes: Tales of Valor	THQ
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II	THQ
Tom Clancy's HAWX	Ubisoft
F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin	Warner Bros. Interactive
Wanted	Warner Bros. Interactive

Q2 2009

Champions Online	2K Games
Dark Void	Capcom
FUEL	Codemasters
Ride to Hell	Deep Silver
Batman: Arkham Asylum	Eidos
Cities XL	Monte Cristo
Two Worlds: The Temptation	SouthPeak Interactive
Avatar	Ubisoft
Prototype	Sierra

Q3 2009

Edge of Twilight	SouthPeak Interactive
Section 8	SouthPeak Interactive

Q4 2009

BioShock 2: Sea of Dreams	2K
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EVAN LAHTI
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

WHAT'S IN AN E-NAME

Would a deathmatch by any other name frag as sweet? Nay, I say. I brought it up as a topic on our weekly podcast (#151, at <http://pcgamer-podcast.com>), but callsign etiquette couldn't be more deserving of public awareness. Let's lay down some ground rules for in-game handles. Abide, and realize that you're bettering the online community by rolling with a meaningful moniker.

#1 BE MEMORABLE What's the first rule of earning a callsign in the Air Force? They're assigned, not chosen. Pilots pick nicknames for their squadmates, usually based on an embarrassing runway escapade ("Crash") or quirky trait ("Revlon"). Embrace what comes naturally—something with a story behind it is always preferable to a seemingly cool-sounding pseudonym.

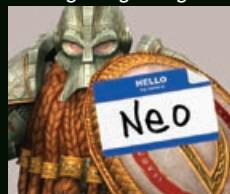
#2 THREE SYLLABLES MAX In the arena of 16 v 16 combat, the difference between a comrade getting crowbarred in the back or backing into a land mine can hinge on how quickly you communicate imminent threats. Branding yourself as "Doctor Octagonapus" or "Tyrannosaurus Rexpialidocious" all but assures your doom, and can't help your kill/death ratio. Shoot for something condensable—"Anonymouse" can be "Anon"; "Captain Spalding" can be "Cap" or just "Spalding."

#3 AVOID MIXED EMULATIONS AND CONTEXTS

1999 was a low point for gaming callsigns.

Naming yourself "Neo" in *Counter-Strike* seemed pre-sumptuous, but it was downright roleplay-damaging in *Diablo*, *StarCraft*, and *EverQuest*.

Good callsigns take the context they're in into consideration I'm looking at you, level 24 Sorceress in my WAR guild, xXPatriot-s4Ever2000Xx).



/// Looking over some *LOTR* wouldn't be a bad idea before naming your dwarf. ///

I'm "Doc Lobster," by the way. It's practical, and it reemphasizes my role when I'm playing Medic in *TF2*. Bonus: I get likened to *Futurama*'s Dr. Zoidberg and hear teammates hum the B-52s classic, "Rock Lobster," while I'm respawning (thanks, Intern Intern Andy).

PREVIEWS



Carnifex Lobsters from hell, these lumbering, living tanks are claw-to-claw specialists, but can be outfitted with bioplasma or venom cannons for ranged combat.

Dreadnought Bipedal tank suit that spits hot death and throws armored uppercuts. To the Space Marines, they're holy hulls: wounded heroes are implanted in the armor after proving themselves invaluable to the Imperium.

Heavy flamer Ignited promethium is good for clearing brush, or cooking up a few 'Nid-ka-bobs.

Bolter These standard-issue .75 caliber pistols fire detonating rounds designed to penetrate alien carapace or enemy armor.

Blood Angels To join this elite chapter of Space Marines, recruits take part in gladiatorial contests on the Blood Angel homeworld, Baal Prime. Survivors willingly enter a coma, sealed in advanced life support equipment that radically re-engineers their physical forms for battle.

HANDS ON ►

WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR II

FIRST LOOK AT THE EPIC SPACE MARINE CAMPAIGN AND MULTIPLAYER

RELEASE DATE:
FEBRUARY 2009

Collect resources. Build up your base. Climb the tech tree. Collect more resources. Pump out a ton of upgraded units and overwhelm the AI with an unstoppable army. Rinse, repeat, and you've got yourself a single-player campaign. That's the way *Dune II* did it back in 1992. That's the way *StarCraft* did it in 1998. And that's the way the original *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War* did it in 2004.

The formula seems to have worked pretty well so far. But Relic Entertainment isn't interested in kowtowing to tradition with *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II*. It's amputated everything it found tiresome about the RTS genre with a bloody chain saw sword, focusing on what it loves with the fine precision of an Eldar splinter rifle.

Gone are the laborious resource-gathering

chores, the base building, and the legions of faceless cannon-fodder units. Instead: shorter missions, active cover mechanics and abilities, and controlling an elite set of squads that you'll know on a first-name basis.

You'll begin with a single Force Commander from the Space Marines' Blood Raven chapter, cruising space in the Strike Cruiser Armageddon (your battle barge and



/// Losing units means more if you're not able to instantly crank out another disposable clone. ///



/// "The original Zerg," Tyranids were featured in *Warhammer 40k*'s second edition in 1993. ///



/// "Power swords: because Tyranids don't like being stabbed with electric blades." ///

home base for managing squads and selecting missions). Our first assignment dropped us on Calderis, helping Captain Davian Thule stave off an Ork invasion. On the surface, we were shoulder-deep in greenskins, so I jammed a hotkey to activate the "To Victory" skill. The Force Commander's power armor crashed through the fray, stunning the space Orks. It felt like something you'd expect from a barbarian or an MMORPG tank, especially as the kills filled my experience bar.

BUT MAKE NO MISTAKE, *DoW II* isn't a skill-spamming clickfest. Taking on more missions bolstered my party with additional squads, but more importantly, the new cover system created a package that felt both action-oriented and more manageable. We weren't mousing units through static maps, but using each grizzly shrub as interactive cover, à la *Company of Heroes*.

Having a wall to lean on, so to speak, builds a buffer for decision-making and

reflects the game's turn-based tabletop roots. We see it in action as we're saddled up behind a grove, holding position to plot our attack on a Tyranid Warrior and the pack of Gaunts around him. They haven't seen us yet. We click to cling to the flora separating us from the aliens, select a single marine, and lob a satchel charge through the brush. Once a timer clicks down, the Tyranid lieutenant's claws and carapace get blown in six directions. The handful of leftover Gaunts go into shock (because they're psychically separated from their superior), making them easy to

VITALS GENRE: REAL-TIME STRATEGY DEVELOPER: RELIC PUBLISHER: THQ URL: WWW.DAWNOFWAR2.COM



Gaunts Bread and butter of the swarm. Numerous, but vulnerable if they don't have a larger Tyranid nearby.

Zoanthrope Formed from harvested Eldar DNA, these psychic generals act as conduits for the Hive Mind.

gr. Meet the Tyranids at gamesradar.com/pc/dowii

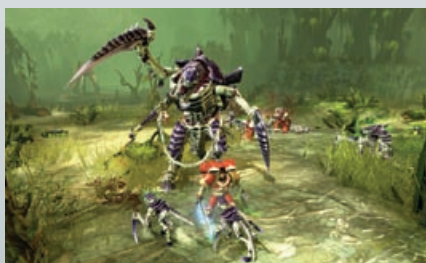
Ravens Subterranean ambushers that erupt from underground.



/// Take after Tarkus—taxiderming a Carnifex can be difficult, but it's sure to impress. ///



/// Priority target: spawning pools spit forth continuous waves of lesser Tyranids. ///



/// Lucky for our Force Commander, injured officers can be revived by other squad leaders. ///

mop up with our bolters. Being a hive mind-controlled race, expect these synapse-linked effects to be a trend among the Tyranids.

LIKE HAVING A STABLE of chess pieces with strengths and weaknesses, managing and upgrading your squads over the course of the campaign will be a big focus. Tarkus' Tactical Space Marines excel at soaking up damage and peppering enemies from the front lines with a constant rain of bolter fire; Cyrus and his sneaky Scouts can destroy cover with their explosive charges, or snipe down high-value targets from afar with High Powered Shot; Thaddeus' Assault Marines can Squad Jump, lighting jetpacks to leapfrog over obstacles and stomp enemies below.

Yes, there are times when *DoW II* screams "I'm an RPG!"—such as when your eyes are drawn to the green text descriptors on equippable loot you'll find along the way. But when my Space Marines were overwhelmed by waves of Tyranids, my fingers flew straight for the number keys to assign control groups. When the dust settled, I had a new set of power armor to upgrade my Force Commander, stat points to spend on boosting the health regeneration rate of Avitus' Devestator squad, and a distress signal urging me to help quell another Ork uprising. /// TYLER NAGATA ///

MULTIPLAYER

Relic's not content with keeping its unique take on the RTS genre out of multiplayer. Base management will still be kept to a minimum. Instead of researching improvements with structures, you'll do it by purchasing upgrades directly from individual units and squads. Capturing and holding control points will yield the resources you'll need to purchase these upgrades, keeping the focus on commanding your forces at all times. Maps will be smaller, trimming down the length of matches and keeping things fast-paced. You'll begin a match by selecting your race (only the Space Marines, Orks, Eldar, and Tyranids were on show). Next, you'll choose one of three types of hero units. Offensive heroes like the Force Commander will excel at dishing out damage. Support heroes like the Apothecary will help buff your squads. And defensive heroes like the Techmarine can lay down structures like turrets or pillboxes to help hold your ground.

HOPE/FEARS

- + Adding RPG goodness in equippable items and persistent units, and focusing on smaller squads could be a breath of fresh air to the genre.
- Micromanagement masters who enjoy controlling large armies may not like *DoW II*'s focus on small groups of squads.

EXCLUSIVE ANNOUNCEMENT

WANTED: WEAPONS OF FATE

RELEASE DATE:
Q1 2009

KILLER CURVES

This is how you know you're a badass: a rival faction of assassins boards the passenger plane you're on, goes through the trouble of killing everybody on board, and then tilts the airliner toward the ground just to kill *you*. It's flattering, really—but then, being a 24-year-old superassassin does invite some unique attention.

Though you're resuming the role of Wesley Gibson just hours after the end of the film, *Wanted: Weapons of Fate* aims and claims to be more than another "see the movie, play the game" tie-in. On the surface, it's single-player third-person action with the expected mechanics: a solid cover system, cinematic slow-mo, semi-destructible environs, and enough ragdoll to make wounding bad guys floppy, disjointed fun for the whole family.

In your hands, it's a charmingly stylized experience, and a seri-

ous student of Midway's *Stranglehold*. Like John Woo's over-the-top gun-fu, using impossible gunplay to overwhelm basic bad guys is the big idea. Curving bullets (prominently featured in the film) with a mouse and keyboard

is as easy and intuitive as bending a line in Photoshop; a neon line anchors points to your pistol and your target, and anything on the trajectory gets a tidy arcing telegram from a .38 slug.

GRIN'S FOCUS IS ON building these straightforward shooter mechanics, but bulking them up with enough style to let you finesse your way through tough shootouts. *Wanted's* cover system is a good example of this. Crouch-rolling between rows of airliner seats seems conventional enough, but chaining this movement together builds "Assassin Time," which can be used to activate slow-mo. Move swiftly enough and the AI will lose track of your position, firing at the last spot of cover they saw you pop out of.

Other cinematic moments supplement the flashy stuff, like scripted on-rails shooting gallery sections that transform *Wanted* into a quasi-light gun game. In a chase through a Chicago apartment complex, the game took control of Wesley's movements while we pointed the reticle around to guide his aim as he broke through windows and slid over tabletops. Later, a quick-time event had us

/// Quick-time events, like this knife duel, will test your WPM. Mavis Beacon: training assassins since 1994. ///



/// GRIN is making a "gore pass" through early builds to get the blood just right. ///

rapid-tapping keys to handle a knife-wielding hood in close quarters. Because *Wanted* won't feature co-op or other multiplayer modes, it'll need to lean on these sections for gameplay variety.

Wanted wants to equip players with a deadly toolset of abilities worthy of a slick assassin. Using enemies as human shields, reaching around cover to stab thugs in the face, blasting open airlock doors to eject enemies into the clouds—whether or not moments like these will be enough to sustain a single-player experience will hinge on polish and variety. Hopefully, *Wanted* will be just that, and not another movie game on our hit list. /// EVAN LAHTI ///

HOPES/FEARS

+ Bullet-bending and other abilities will make for a refreshingly un-straightforward experience; for a multiplatform game, GRIN's Diesel engine is pushing out PC-worthy character models and visual effects.

- All the bullets are in one basket: with no co-op or multiplayer planned, the single-player needs to stand out. Slow-mo cinematic kill sequences tend to get old after a dozen or more times.

/// Hand-me-downs: Wesley dons his dad's assassin suit. ///

/// VITALS /// GENRE: ACTION DEVELOPER: GRIN PUBLISHER: WARNER BROS. INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT URL: WWW.GRIN.SE

/// Zank! Combat features a fair amount of flashy combos and finishing moves to transition between foes. ///

BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM

RELEASE DATE:
Q2 2009

■ WHY SO CURIOUS? A BETTER CLASS OF BAT GAME

The idea is an obvious one, you'd think: make a Batman game where you act like Batman. Except, looking at the history of Batman games, it doesn't appear to have occurred to anyone else. Like, ever. Batman as a fighter. Batman as a platformer. Even Batman as a surrealist isometric adventure. They all capture bits of the Caped Crusader, sure—but it's not the whole picture.

Arkham Asylum, created by London's Rocksteady Studios, locks the Dark Knight in the *BioShock*-esque closed setting of Arkham. The Joker and his hundreds of goons (plus the assortment of supervillains jailed within) have taken over, and Batman must bring all his mental and physical talents to bear to stop them. This means handling bad guys in close quarters, which we know is easy enough: a sweep of the cape can stun thugs, leaving them vulnerable to combo chains. But if you're playing as Batman, stalking from the shadows should be just as viable as punching bad guys' bones out.

You'll be able to stealth around some, but avoiding combat altogether by sneaking around patrolling foes won't be the goal. Using stealth to pick thugs off one by one until they're all quivering in fear (a behavior built into the AI) is more what Rocksteady is aiming for. Guards will group to protect each other, or panic and blindfire, depending on your approach. And other than bat-arangs and gliding kicks, distinctive tricks

like grabbing a guard passing beneath you with your grappling line will be among Batman's feats. Once they're dangling, you can cut the rope and use them as a trap.

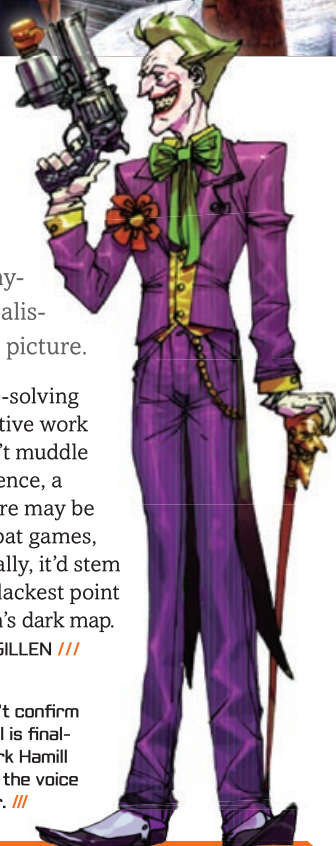
ALTERNATING BETWEEN stealthy violence and unstealthy violence won't be the full extent of the experience, of course. Being The World's Greatest Detective (sorry, Sherlock), an investigative mode lets Batman use CSI-o-vision to scour Arkham for clues: visual overlays that bring everything from fingerprints to opponents' weapons into focus. Once you've identified who a set of fingerprints belongs to, you can use tech to track them and follow an "evidence trail."

Currently confirmed villains include Killer Croc, The Riddler, Bane, Mr. Zsasz, and Harley Quinn. Understandably, the most attention has been paid the Joker, who takes a similar role to Andrew Ryan (in *BioShock*) or SHODAN (in *System Shock*), baiting you and mocking your every move. If *Arkham Asylum* can combine stealthy action

and puzzle-solving with detective work that doesn't muddle the experience, a bright future may be ahead for bat games, and ironically, it'd stem from the blackest point on Gotham's dark map.

/// KIERON GILLEN ///

/// Eidos can't confirm that the deal is finalized, but Mark Hamill may provide the voice of The Joker. ///



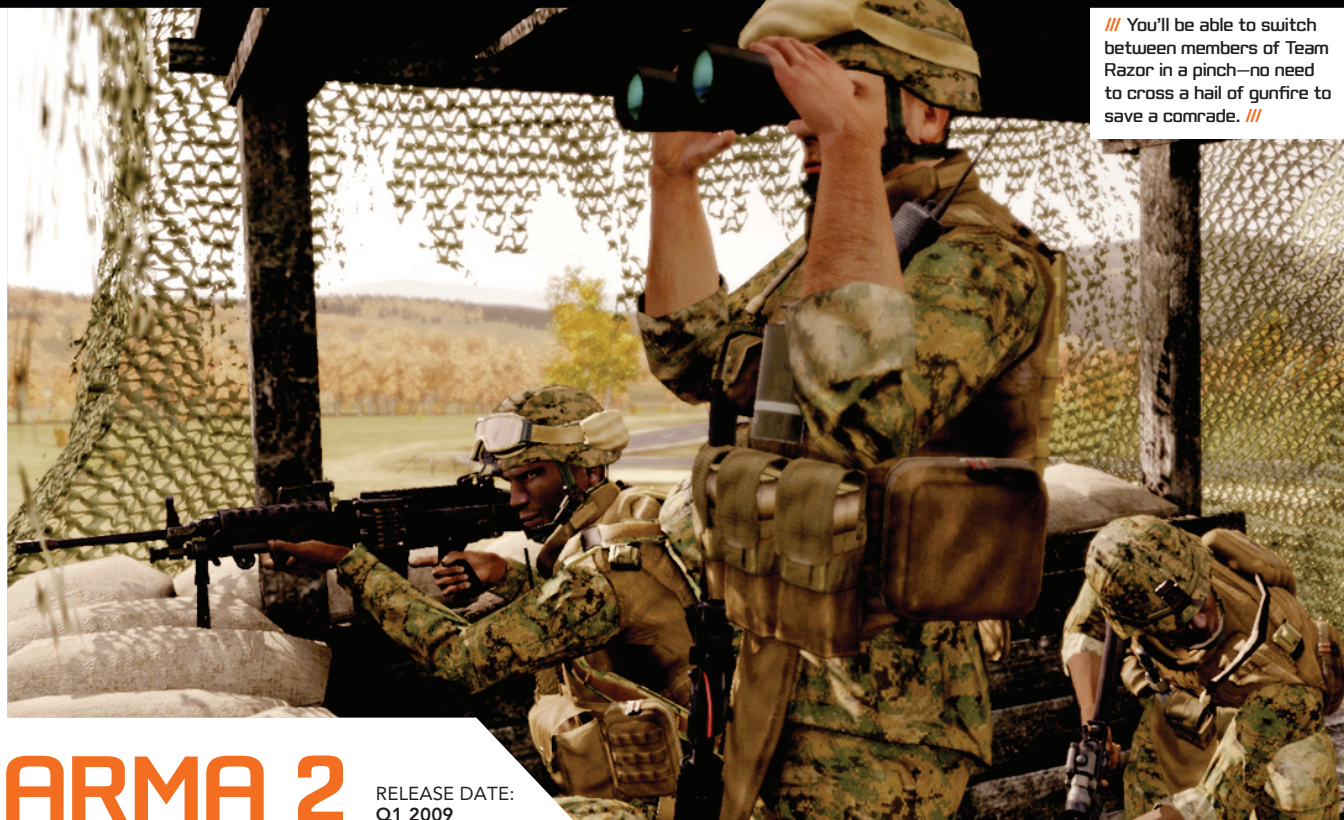
■ HOPES/FEARS ■

+ Open-area gameplay structure; a story penned by Paul Dini means up-front cred for fans of the comics and '90s animated series. Gritty, dark character design reminds us of *Gears of War* and *Chronicles of Riddick*.

- Building a game that juggles hand-to-hand combat, detective work, storytelling, and stealth within a renowned IP is a high task for a dev with only one game (*Urban Chaos: Riot Response*) under its belt.

■ VITALS ■ GENRE: ACTION DEVELOPER: ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS PUBLISHER: EIDOS URL: WWW.ROCKSTEADY.LTD.COM

/// You'll be able to switch between members of Team Razor in a pinch—no need to cross a hail of gunfire to save a comrade. ///



ARMA 2

RELEASE DATE:
Q1 2009

■ AMBITIOUS SIM SHOOTER SEQUEL FROM OPERATION FLASHPOINT'S ORIGINAL DEVS

Almost two years on from the release of the excellent (once patched and modded) *ArmA*, Bohemia Interactive is well on the way to completing a sequel that's bigger, smarter, and more realistic. Thanks to an intriguingly complex backdrop and a character-crammed campaign with more twists

than a narwhal's tusk, *ArmA 2* should also prove far more involving than its predecessor. That backdrop is Chernarus, a 140-square-mile portion of a fictional European nation gripped by civil war. Think early '90s Yugoslavia spliced with contemporary Georgia/Ossetia, and you'll have some idea of the mess and the mayhem. Into this confusing crucible steps a NATO rapid reaction force, the diamond-hard tip of which is a player-controlled five-man USMC Special Forces group, Team Razor.

While the country and combatants are fictional, the geography is very real. The studio's usual approach to mapmaking is to pluck contours, road networks, and

settlement positions from thin air; this time, they're basing their environments on authentic Czech countryside. As lead designer Marek Spanel puts it, "There's logic in a real landscape. Dozens of generations created the villages, forests grew naturally...you can't hope to create that look artificially."

An organic landscape sounds promising, but BI plans to populate its space with useful comrades, too—finally allowing us to drag, carry, and treat wounded soldiers. Hauling an injured buddy to safety while bullets fizz past has to be one of the most exciting and gratifying things you can do in a shooter. Whether AI-controlled enemies will help out in the same way remains to be seen, but they should take advantage of the other AI improvements. Expect to see hostiles using building corners for cover and—this one's a biggie—using suppression fire to support advancing allies. As near-misses now cause weapon shake (more fear means more sway), such tactics can turn firefights.

Other reasons to be cheerful about *ArmA 2*? It'll feature over 70 weapons ranging from hunting rifles to MANPAD missiles,



/// Planned vehicles range from APCs to SUVs. ///

and 136 different vehicles including UAVs, fishing boats, and bicycles. HALO insertions are now possible. You can play through the entire branching campaign cooperatively. The old sound engine has been replaced—vehicle signatures now consist of dozens of separate sounds. Just about the only area of *ArmA* that BI might have improved but hasn't (not significantly, at least), is the clunky menu-driven interface. If *Operation Flashpoint 2* doesn't feature a slicker, more intuitive GUI, we'll eat our sweat-stained boonie hats. ///TIM STONE ///

■ HOPES/FEARS ■

+ Mechanics such as near-miss shots causing weapon shake could encourage immersive, realistic tactics. An intricate mission editor is planned; AI allegedly doesn't use any scripts or pathfinding to flank and outsmart you.

– Bohemia might compromise some of its pedigree for realism to accommodate gamepads for the planned multplatform release. How will dozens of vehicles and weapons balance online?

■ VITALS ■ GENRE: SHOOTER DEVELOPER: BOHEMIA INTERACTIVE PUBLISHER: 505 GAMES
URL: WWW.ARMA2.COM



/// BI's aiming for authentic material penetration, stopping power, and weapon ballistics. ///

LEFT 4 DEAD

/// Yes, the title is a gigantic pun. The sequel will probably be *Zombies B My Brain*. ///

/// BY DAN STAPLETON ///

A TERRIFYING REDEFINITION OF CO-OP GAMING THAT WILL HAVE YOU DRENCHED IN BLOOD, SWEAT, AND TEARS

Rescue is here—after a long, bloody battle with countless zombies, you and three fellow survivors have made it to the rooftop of a ravaged hospital, where a helicopter lands to evacuate you to safety. In a blaze of gunfire and guts, you and two of your companions fight your way to the helipad and climb aboard the chopper, but the fourth member of your team is wounded and limping behind you. At the last second, a snake-like



tongue shoots out from the darkness, wraps around him, and drags him kicking and screaming back into the grasp of the horde. You have a choice to make: do you leave the chopper, endangering the lives of the rest of the team, to attempt a rescue? Or do you cut your losses, tell yourself you couldn't have saved him, and try to ignore the horrible sounds of a swarm of flesh-hungry zombies tearing him limb from limb? The essence of gaming has often been described as "a series of interesting choices," and this is easily one of the single most interesting choices I've ever faced.

LEFT 4 DEAD IS BASED on the same plot as those of nearly every zombie horror film ever made: as one of four survivors of a devastating zombie apocalypse, you must get from point A to point B in one piece in order to escape, but between you and your goal is an army of hungry zombies. *L4D* pays homage

/// The 2008 Zombie Olympics features events like the 1,000 Mile Unrelenting Chase, Rail-Hopping, Wall-Scaling, and, of course, Brain Eating. ///



gr For more undead coverage, visit gamesradar.com/pc/left4dead

LEFT 4 DEAD

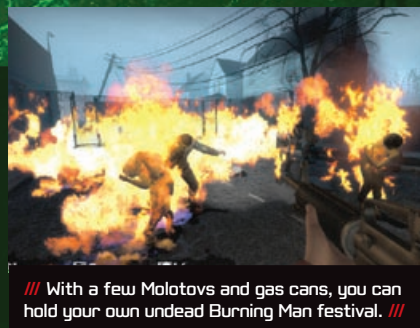
to its inspirational source material with movie poster-style loading screens and end-of-round stats that roll like credits. The four campaigns (see Zombie Territory boxout on page 33) each average a little over an hour in length; they're designed primarily to be played in co-op mode with three other players over LAN or Steam's online matchmaking service, but you can play them all in single-player mode along with three AI-controlled survivors (see Tasty Artificial Brains boxout on page 34).

EACH CAMPAIGN BEGINS

with the four survivors in a "safe room" stocked with weapons, ammunition, and medical supplies, and equipped with a reinforced zombie-proof door (and a barred window that a zombie arm can reach through, groping around for a victim).

to regroup between waves. The effect is seamless; while you will often be attacked by zombies coming from an area you've already swept clean, which makes no logical sense if you stop to think about it, there is little time for reality checks, and you'll be too busy enjoying blasting zombie heads off to care, anyway.

Maybe it's because there haven't been many good co-op games on the PC up to this point, but this is the first time I have felt that I truly needed to act as part of the group in order to succeed. In most other team-based games (*Counter-Strike* being a notable exception), a "team" is a loose association of players who can run off and do their own thing if they want, and if they get killed, they just respawn and repeat. In *L4D*, respawning isn't a right, it's a privilege—get taken out and your teammates



/// With a few Molotovs and gas cans, you can hold your own undead Burning Man festival. ///



/// In situations like this, friendly fire incidents occur roughly every three to five seconds. ///

THE BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL IS FAST, BLOODY, AND TERRIFYING



/// Ruined environments and zombies' clothing tell the story of how the outbreak went down. ///

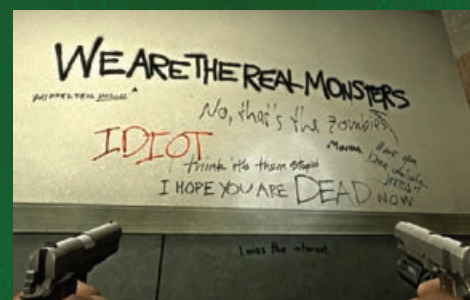
The moment you unlock the door and step into zombie-infested territory is a good time to unlearn everything you know about playing squad-based shooters, because in *L4D*, to lose sight of your teammates is to invite doom.

The battle for survival is fast, bloody, and terrifying in a way so few "horror" games are. Swift-moving *28 Days Later*-style zombies charge at you from everywhere and anywhere, attempting to grab a chunk of meat. *L4D*'s "Director" AI is remarkably effective at keeping you on your toes by spawning zombies in different, unexpected spots, giving you only a few moments

will have to find another survivor locked up in a closet (you, placed by the Director), or else you're stuck in spectator mode until they reach the next safe room. Survivors are quite durable, though, and can be helped back up by a teammate even when their health is knocked down to zero a few times, so you don't spend too much time in the penalty box.

WHO'S THE BOSS

The run-of-the-mill zombies are little more than backup dancers to the five types of "boss infected" (see Dead and Loving It boxout on page 36) that stalk you. Even in large numbers, normal zombies



/// Take a moment to read the notes scrawled on the safe room walls. Some give hints of backstory, and others are hilarious. ///

ZOMBIE TERRITORY

NO MERCY

A gentle, but ultimately punishing intro on familiar urban turf; the narrow walls of a destroyed apartment complex, subway, sewer, and construction site train survivors in room-clearing and cooperation. These spaces seem defensible by comparison to the climax: a last-stand on a rooftop where you fend off waves of infected dressed in hospital gowns, nurse uniforms, and doctors' white coats.

DEATH TOLL

Escaping by boat seems like a bright idea. Death Toll is a more rural scenario, with some light forest in the first stage giving way to storm drains and small town areas later on. The climactic battle takes place on a dock house overlooking a hill as zombies run through the trees and attack from all sides while you wait for your ship to come in. Beware of Smokers yanking you off the roof!

DEAD AIR

Leave your luggage: get to the tarmac! Environments range from a greenhouse to being swarmed by undead flight attendants, and a memorable standoff on the escalators near baggage claim stands out against Dead Air's relatively underwhelming end scene, where a spectacular scripted plane crash creates

havoc on the runway. Zombie waves weave through a runway littered with wreckage, but the lack of a real defensible structure makes your last stand feel less tactical. Dead Air's wide-open spaces mean it's the scenario where the hunting rifle is most valuable.

BLOOD HARVEST

This is easily *L4D*'s most difficult scenario, with a heavily wooded area that makes it easy for zombies to approach unseen, a tunnel section with close-quarters combat, and a heavy attack in a train yard. The climax is a farm-house siege (surrounded by an ambush-friendly corn maze) right out of classic horror films, with zombies charging in through the doors and climbing in through every window.



/// Falling off the building is another danger to watch out for in No Mercy's finale. ///

VITALS: GENRE: FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER DEVELOPER: VALVE PUBLISHER: VALVE/EA REQUIRED: P4 3GHz, 1GB RAM (2GB VISTA), GEFORCE 6600/RADEON 9600 128MB VIDEOCARD, 7.5GB HD SPACE, INTERNET CONNECTION RECOMMENDED: DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, GEFORCE 9800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD, BROADBAND INTERNET MAX PLAYERS: 8 ESRB: M DRM: ONLINE ACTIVATION; MUST INSTALL AND RUN STEAM CLIENT; UNLIMITED INSTALLS

/// Scripted events like this amazing plane crash in *Dead Air* are rare, but spectacular. ///



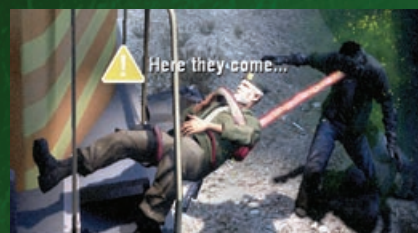
rarely pose a serious threat to well-coordinated survivors, but being forced to deal with the masses creates a perfect diversion that allows the boss infected to close in for the kill. It's these super-zombies that truly put your survival in the hands of your teammates, because they can pin you down and render you helpless until a teammate comes to your rescue. While the existence of "special" zombies is somewhat antithetical to the entire concept of zombies, the variety and flavor they add to the action is undeniable, and they successfully prevent the inevitable boredom that comes from fighting just one type of enemy. Plus, hearing the disgusting gurgle of a Boomer or the distinctive, haunting wail of a Witch somewhere nearby elevates the tension to a level well above what is safely playable by gamers with heart conditions.

TEAM FORTRESS ZOMBIE

The importance of teamwork may be a point of frustration when playing online, at least at first. The ability to see your teammates' outlines through walls is a more useful tool for coordination than any screen-cluttering mini-map, but trying to convince everyone to stick close and cover each other is tough even when you're all experienced gamers sitting in the same room in a LAN game—doing it over the game's built-in voice chat (or worse, the text-based quick-commands) with anonymous teammates accustomed to playing Rambo-style is a recipe for disaster. Your first few attempts are likely to end in tears,

but once everyone has learned their very painful lesson and started to function as a group and listen to each other, the real game can begin.

Survivors are limited to one primary weapon—at the start of each campaign you have a choice of an Uzi or a pump-action shotgun—in addition to your unlimited-ammo backup pistol and a single pipe bomb or Molotov cocktail. In the later parts of the campaign you'll be able to swap your primary weapon for a more powerful assault rifle, semi-automatic shotgun, or scoped hunting rifle. This is another means by which *L4D* forces cooperation, because one player cannot carry enough weaponry to handle every situation (and zombies will not let you call time-out to reload). The



/// Expect to hear your teammates screaming "SMOKER! Heeeelp!" on a regular basis. ///

current arsenal is a bit anemic, though, and boils down to only three types of weapon: rapid fire, shotgun, and long-range rifle—and the rifle is really only useful in certain wide-open areas where you can use the scope to snipe zombies. But, because the survivors are always on the move you can never hold a sniping position for very long, and the rifle's low rate-of-fire makes it

TASTY ARTIFICIAL BRAINS

Can you trust a bot to watch your back? Well, yes and no. They'll guard your rear from zombie attacks with precision aim, come to your aid if you're ensnared by a Hunter or a Smoker, and mostly stay with you as you push forward, but you can't communicate with them in any meaningful way. The lack of a squad control system makes any kind of real coordination impossible, since you can't set up ambushes, post guards on corners, or even count on them to keep up if you make a dash for the safe room. On the

other hand, you don't feel as bad when you sacrifice them as a distraction so that you can escape. Just keep in mind that the bots aren't much help when you turn the difficulty up above normal.

However, they do have a handy trick: If one of the survivors is disconnected or just goes to get a snack, their character is temporarily taken over by a bot until they return or someone else joins the game. It's not a perfect solution, since bots cannot pull their weight in an intense game, but it's a lot better than just vanishing or standing still to be devoured, leaving your team a man down.

nearly useless in close-quarters combat indoors. It would have been nice to see some extra weapons (flamethrowers and chain saws come to mind), but there are enough available to get the job done.

No matter how good a shot you are, at least a few zombies will get up close and personal, and there are few things more terrifying than being surrounded by growling zombies tearing away at your flesh. The right mouse button rifle-butts them, sending them staggering backwards for a second and giving you some breathing room—time to reload or retreat. But rifle-butting isn't just a last resort—it's also a very useful tool that can be used for a variety of tactics. For example, you can use it to push a Boomer back before shooting him, in order to avoid being slimed in the explosion.

UNDEAD ANTICS

Each campaign has a different setting, but all follow roughly the same structure, with five stages separated by safe rooms. It's not all strictly run-and-gun as fast as you can towards the exit, though—Valve pulls a few tricks to mix up the pace. For example, at certain points you must push a button in order to clear a path—e.g., sending a van crashing through a locked door. Those situations come with a warning of, "Get ready to fight the horde!" This gives you a moment to dig in and think about how best to use your environment to destroy an incoming rush of zombies, such as setting up choke points and throwing down Molotov cocktails in their path, before triggering the rush.

Also, at random intervals determined by the director AI, the hulking Tank zombie will show up. It's such a major event that the music changes to an ominous theme and the screen shakes, giving the survivors a brief warning that something really bad is about to go down, so they'd better change their tactics (like getting out of confined corridors and into an open area where they have a chance at evading, and everyone can get a clear shot). The director will also occasionally place a Witch in your path,



/// If Salem, MA has taught us nothing else, it's that fire gets rid of witches. ///

DEAD AND LOVING IT



BOOMER

A fat, disgusting blob of zombie goo. The Boomer has two modes of attack: he can either vomit bile on survivors, or he can charge into a group of survivors and hope to be shot, causing him to explode all over them. Any survivor slimed by a Boomer will immediately be swarmed by about a dozen zombies. Successfully sliming all four survivors at once and watching zombies swarm in is evil at its most rewarding.



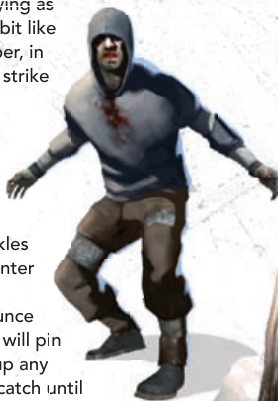
TANK

A massive, muscular zombie hulk. They're rare, but when they are near, the music will ominously change to warn you of impending doom. If a Tank gets close enough he'll smack survivors halfway across the neighborhood, or he can rip up chunks of concrete and hurl them at survivors.



SMOKER

A tall, lanky zombie with a frog-like tongue. If a survivor is caught, he has about a second to shoot the Smoker before he becomes entangled and gets dragged in for the kill, and can only be freed if another survivor attacks the Smoker. Playing as the Smoker is a bit like playing as a sniper, in that they like to strike from rooftops.



HUNTER

A nimble hoodie-wearing zombie that tackles his prey. The Hunter can leap great distances to pounce on his prey, and will pin down and tear up any survivor he can catch until another survivor knocks him off. Watch out for Hunters as you go to rescue a fellow survivor, or you may need rescuing as well.

WITCH

The Witch is the only non-playable zombie class because she's simply too powerful. She will randomly appear somewhere on the map, where she'll just sit by herself, minding her own business and wailing, until some rude survivor comes by and shines a flashlight on her. When startled, she's the deadliest zombie around—one hit will knock you on your ass. Avoid her if you can!



/// When the outbreak comes, you know the Olsen twins will become Witches. ///



/// Even without voice chat, on-screen notifications let you know when and where your friends are in trouble. ///

ONCE YOU'VE PLAYED IT, TRY THIS TRICK: PLAY IT AGAIN.

making you change tactics once again by turning off your flashlights and sneaking by. Even though you get an audio warning in the form of her wailing cry, Witches can sometimes seem like unfair enemies, because if they spawn in certain positions, like right around a corner, it may be impossible to sneak by or even find them without startling them. That can easily ruin your good mood.

In the fifth stage of each campaign, the survivors reach a rendezvous point for their extraction and signal their readiness over a radio, then must hold out for several minutes against the most intense zombie onslaught yet. These climactic scenes are real nail-biters, with heavily armed survivors fending off attackers coming from all

sides until rescue arrives, at which point they must make a desperate run for the evacuation vehicle against a last-minute zombie surge. It's a scenario that all but the best players will only survive by the skin of their teeth, if at all, making for some incredibly tense moments.

The campaign content, which took our crack squad about six hours to fight through, may seem meager at first for a full-priced game, but once you've played it, try this trick: play it again. The Director ensures excellent variety on each playthrough by shuffling around weapon, item (like explosive barrels and ammo drops), and enemy placement. In one round, Team PCG set up an ambush for an incoming horde of zombies using a pair of gas cans we found, frying the entire lot nearly effortlessly. The next time through that same area there were no gas cans to be found, so we were forced to come up with a new strategy to deal with what we thought would be the same attack...but zombies poured through a vent in the ceiling behind us, taking us by surprise. Once you think you've got a handle on things, the advanced and expert difficulty levels will keep the challenge fresh for significantly longer (and unlock some extra achievements).

FOUR SIZES FIT ALL

One relatively minor quibble that stuck in my craw is the inability to customize my in-game avatar. The four survivors (Bill,

Louis, Zoey, and Francis) all look fantastic in this newest version of the Source engine, and sport detailed facial animations, plus individualized voices for contextual color commentary, but being shoehorned into one of these roles ever-so-slightly cramped my style. Plus, you don't always get to choose which of the survivors to play as, and someone's always going to get stuck playing as the girl. Not that there's anything wrong with that, as the differences between characters are 100 percent cosmetic, but



/// Shotguns are excellent for zombie dismemberment, but don't get caught reloading. ///



/// Downed survivors are like zombie buffets. Where's a sneeze-guard when you need it? ///

the lack of choice is a bit surprising in a modern game.

Besides lacking opportunities to barricade a door against a crowd of zombies or rip through them with a chain saw, and the notable absence of a shopping mall campaign (too cliché, Valve?), *Left 4 Dead* delivers every moment you could hope for in a zombie game. Case in point: you get to legitimately shout to your teammates, "Leave me, I'm done for! Save yourselves—GO!" while you try to buy them some

time by firing your dual pistols into the descending horde as you lie wounded on the ground. And as awesome as that is, the unique experience of playing as the boss infected almost steals the show from the survivors. *Left 4 Dead's* emphasis on teamwork and vague hints of story may not appeal to gamers who demand a focused single-player experience, but for the millions out there who have ever imagined their role in the inevitable Zombie Apocalypse, it simply cannot be missed. ❌

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Incredibly tense gameplay; Versus mode multiplayer; extremely replayable.

LOWS// Only two campaigns support Versus; no character customization; no explicit story.

BOTTOM LINE// *Left 4 Dead* puts you smack in the middle of the Zombie Apocalypse in one of the most pulse-pounding team-based games we've ever seen. You could play this for years.

0% BETTER >> 100% **94%**
** EDITORS' CHOICE **

THE HUNTED BECOME THE HUNTERS

YOU HAVEN'T LIVED UNTIL YOU'VE PLAYED AS THE UNDEAD IN VERSUS-MODE MULTIPLAYER

As suspenseful as the single-player and co-op gameplay are, nothing puts the fear in you like an eight-player Versus mode multiplayer game, in which two teams of four alternate playing as the survivors and the boss infected through each of the five stages of a campaign. What's so scary? *L4D* manages to capture the primal sensation of being hunted. As the survivors, you know you can never hide; the infected team can see your outline through walls just like you can see your own team, they can spawn anywhere near you (as long as it's just out of sight and not too close), and they can use ladders that are invisible to humans in order to reach areas the survivors can't get to, and then literally get the drop on you. While individual

boss infected are easily killed and don't pose much of a threat, working together to distract and divide survivors, they can pull some really evil tricks. Some of the most rewarding moments in *L4D* come while playing as the infected, when you seize just the right moment to strike and pick off a straggling survivor. The infected team is handicapped, though, by the fact that the players are randomly assigned the type of infected they spawn as, and when the Tank spawns, a player is randomly chosen to control it, so that one person can't simply repeat the same tactics over and over.

The scoring system of Versus mode is a stroke of genius: the only way to score points is during your turn as the survivors (the further you get

into the level, the more points you earn). Think of it like football, except you are the ball, and the defensive line is made up of omniscient zombies. And while playing as the infected you don't have to worry about score, so you can concentrate on the only thing zombies are supposed to care about: killing humans.

Perhaps the greatest disappointment of *L4D* is that Valve, like many great entertainers, has left us wanting more. Specifically, at launch only two of the four campaigns support Versus mode. On the bright side, Valve has said they plan to implement it in the other two, and they certainly have a reputation as a developer that follows through with free post-release updates, but out of the box, two Versus campaigns is all you're getting.



Francis' facial expression says more than words ever could.

ScottD killed Smoker
PCG Dan hit ScottD

The purple outlines mean these three survivors have been slimed by a Boomer. Strike when they're distracted by the regular zombies.

The Tank really throws his weight around. I once punched a survivor off a roof and knocked him halfway across the neighborhood.

Zombie-vision turns everything sepia tone to help you to hunt in the dark.

PRIMARY ATTACK: PUNCH

ATTACK THE SURVIVORS
You must attack or you will lose control of the Tank

CONTROL

Use it or lose it. Valve has wisely limited your ability to camp out and wait for the survivors to enter an area they'd least like to meet a Tank in.



DAN STAPLETON
REVIEWS EDITOR

REVIEWS

QTES CAN GTFO

You'll see the phrase "quick-time events," or QTEs, pop up a lot in this issue. You probably know them by another name: "Those really annoying things where the game takes away your controls and says 'Push space bar!' to make your character dodge the garbage truck that's been thrown at him." QTEs are a huge fad in console games right now because they let developers show your character doing something cinematic that couldn't be pulled off in regular gameplay without completely removing the player from the equation, and they commonly pop up on the PC in cross-platform games and ports such as this month's *Spider-Man: Web of Shadows*, *Bully: Scholarship Edition*, *Quantum of Solace*, and *Tomb Raider: Underworld*. They're normally mindlessly easy inconveniences, and sometimes optional, but when something goes wrong—like making a mandatory QTE "challenging" by giving you just a tiny fraction of a second to hit the right key—they become the gaming equivalent of hitting a brick wall.

QTEs are the absolute worst when strung together in a long sequence, like in *Spider-Man*, where if you fail the fourth part you're forced to start again at the beginning, which usually includes some kind of cut-scene setup. I cannot think of a worse use of gamers' time than making them sit through the same cut-scene five times in a row, especially when they're more than two seconds long. At the very least, give us the option to skip the stupid thing after the third failed attempt.

In short: Stop it. Stop it now. Most of us would rather just watch a cut-scene and get back to actually playing our game!

LESSONS OF THE DEAD

■ WHAT WE'VE LEARNED FROM 40 YEARS OF ZOMBIE MOVIES JUST MIGHT SAVE YOU IN *LEFT 4 DEAD*

- 1. Gnome man is an island.
- 2. There was a time when Michael Jackson wasn't scary.
- 3. Don't trust the douchebag.
- 4. Being Michelle Rodriguez won't save you.
- 5. There are worse things than being dead.
- 6. There are worse things than being undead.
- 7. Pools don't clean themselves.
- 8. That's not acne.
- 9. Open the door.
- 10. Don't open the door.
- 11. Your boyfriend is dead.
- 12. Your girlfriend is dead.
- 13. Your mother is dead.
- 14. Your wife is dead.
- 15. The fat chick at the Dairy Queen—dead.
- 16. Wait, your wife's not dead.
- 17. Well, she's dead now.
- 18. Dogs can look up.
No, they can't - Ed.

BUT THE NUMBER ONE LESSON WE'VE LEARNED IS...

Can you name the movies these screenshots come from? If you think you can, match up the movie names with the numbered screenshots (except number 6, which depicts Uwe Boll—*shudder*) and send your list to letters@pcgamer.com with *ZombieShuffle* in the subject line. We'll pick entrants at random, and keep picking 'em until we've got five responses with at least 15 of the 18 screenshots correctly identified. If you're one of the lucky five, we'll send you a free boxed copy of *Left 4 Dead*. (Don't forget to send us your full name and mailing address in the message body.) Contest ends January 20, 2009. See full contest rules on page 95.

HOW WE RATE THE GAMES

90%

EDITORS' CHOICE

100%-90%

It's not easy to get here, and games in this range come with our unqualified recommendation.

80%

EXCELLENT

89%-80%

These are excellent games. They're well worth buying, and each one is likely a great example of its genre.

70%

GOOD

79%-70%

These are pretty good games that we'd recommend to fans of the particular genre, but better options exist.

60%

ABOVE AVERAGE

69%-60%

Reasonable, above-average games. They might be worth buying, but they probably have a few significant flaws.

50%

MERELY OKAY

59%-50%

Very ordinary games. They're not completely worthless, but you can definitely find numerous better choices.

40%

TOLERABLE

49%-40%

Poor quality. Only a few slightly redeeming features keep these games from the abyss of the next category.

30%

DON'T BOTHER

39%-0%

Just terrible. These games are the electronic equivalent of being smothered by a thousand furious furballs.



/// Alternating between fronts in Berlin and Okinawa keeps the scenery fresh. We wish our Axis enemies used cover a little more, though. ///

More co-op & multiplayer info at gamesradar.com/pc/codwaw

CALL OF DUTY: WORLD AT WAR

CO-OP LIVENS THINGS UP, BUT DOESN'T ELEVATE THE LATEST COD BEYOND A WWII-THEMED SHOOTING GALLERY

Last year, we welcomed *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* as a redefining entry in a franchise in need of a reboot: a polished, action movie-like execution of set pieces with a rewarding multiplayer space, all pushed by an engine that took no prisoners. Our review (January 08, 91%) praised it as "one of the most thrilling

and cinematic war experiences ever."

So, seeing the franchise rewind back to WWII in *Call of Duty: World at War* may appear to be a regression, but it retains many (although definitely not all) of the things that made *CoD4* so intense. In fact, *World at War* is a deeply symmetrical reapplication of *CoD4*'s brilliant design, though executed

with noticeably less polish. This should sound familiar: a two-front campaign (the Russians wrapping up Stalingrad and Berlin, the Americans sieging Okinawa and other Pacific outposts) that includes a stealthy sniper mission, an aerial ops interlude, demolition-based objectives, busting tanks with shoulder-mounted missiles, aggres-



/// Don't get cocky, kid: strafing Japanese supply ships is just an on-rails side-mission. ///

sive pacing, and respawning enemies that tumble into the environment so fast you'll think the Nazis arrived in clown cars.

BUT WHY MESS WITH what works? When I was gunning down whole battalions before army-crawling far enough to deactivate the spawn points in *CoD4*, it was annoying; in *WaW*, the same gameplay supports what the game is going for: a WWII shooting gallery framed on a larger scale than *CoD4*. Mowing down ranks of easily dispatched enemies is more purposeful in four-player



/// There's only one tank mission in the single-player campaign, but it's a good diversion. ///



/// Enemies lose limbs faster than Mr. Potato head, upping *World at War*'s brutal tone. ///

co-op mode, where scoring and achievements combined with satisfying weapons fashion a less authentic but more arcade-action experience.

Storytelling isn't the strong suit that it was in *CoD4* (even with Kiefer Sutherland and Gary Oldman lending their voices), but some memorable scenes manage to tally up over the seven-hour, 15-chapter campaign. As a Russian private that survives a massacre by

MULTIPLAYER

Hopping into *WaW*'s multiplayer is like revisiting an old war buddy that you haven't seen in a year and finding that in spite of his new "retro" wardrobe, he's still the same old guy. The repurposing of *CoD4*'s multiplayer is pretty well-executed. The main difference is that the 13 maps are wider than *CoD4*'s (better accommodating 32-player games) and built less for tactics than easy action. They're less structured as a result, since players have more avenues to roam and flank, but are a little more accessible to new players because success doesn't depend as much on knowing all the choke points. The core game-types make a return: sabotage, free-for-all, team deathmatch, domination, and search and destroy. The one new mode, war, is a larger-scale variation on domination where players build "momentum" by racking up kills and capturing flags to capture flags even faster. (The realistic hardcore option is also available.)

The perks system injects replayability, granting tangible character progress by sprinkling in achievements and new abilities, showing progress by stamping the screen with floating "EXP" labels as you earn kills and capture positions. Unfortunately, nearly all of the actual perks are copy/pasted from *CoD4*, like Extreme Conditioning, Stopping Power, Double Tap, Deep Impact, Juggernaut, and (wait for it...) Martyrdom. There's simply



/// *WaW* sets the table for 32 players, but a lot of the features are leftovers. ///

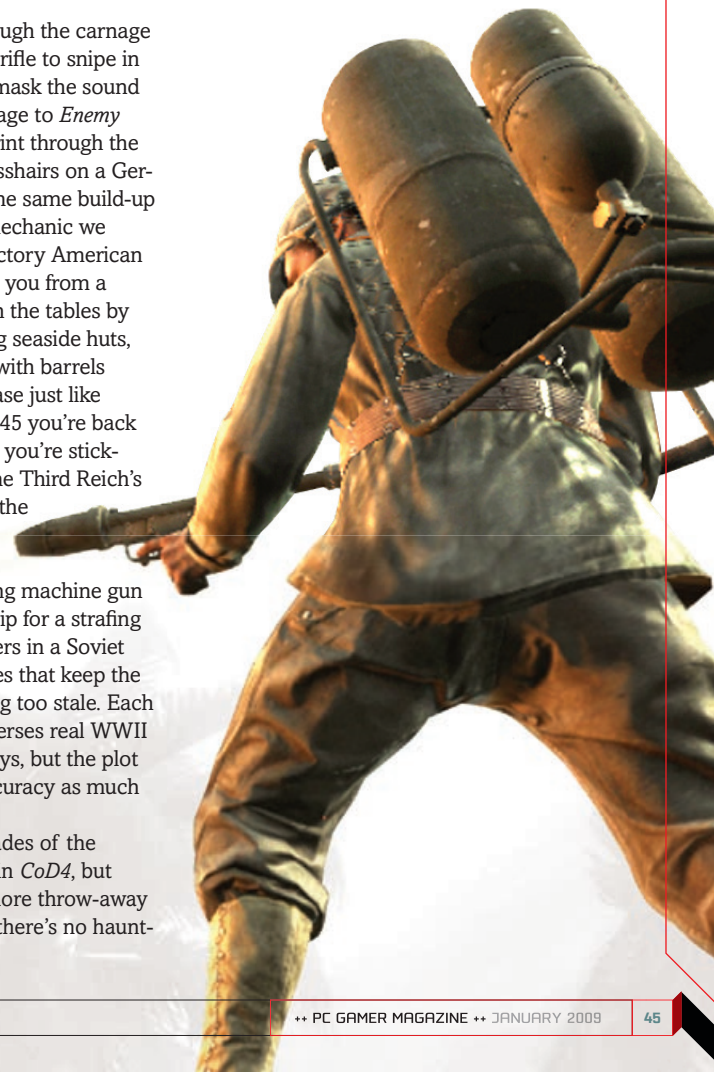
too much borrowing here, and the addition of vehicle perks (like Greased Bearings, which improves turret rotation speed) doesn't erase the feeling that you're retreading near-identical territory. The character progression was one of the best assets of *CoD4*'s multiplayer, and it's a shame there are just a few new abilities to unlock (the flamethrower unlock at level 65 being the big one) in the follow-up. In-game bonuses are similar, too. Racking up three, five, or seven kills earns you radar coverage, artillery, or attack dogs, which roam the environment looking for targets to bite.

WaW's online play does feel a bit like a mod of *CoD4*, but it's a professional-quality mod, and the familiar feel and mechanics, along with (noticeably sluggish) vehicles, class customization, and perks all work reasonably well in the new (I mean old) setting.

playing dead, you crawl through the carnage with a comrade, salvaging a rifle to snipe in unison with bomb drops to mask the sound of your shots (likely an homage to *Enemy at the Gates*). Then, you'll sprint through the shelled city to tune your crosshairs on a German officer (sadly, without the same build-up and wind-affected sniping mechanic we saw in *CoD4*). In the introductory American mission, reinforcements free you from a Japanese POW camp to turn the tables by destroying munitions, raiding seaside huts, and pushing a truck loaded with barrels of gasoline into a fortified base just like Bruce Willis might've. By 1945 you're back in Europe, Hitler's dead, and you're stick-grenading and bayoneting the Third Reich's last-standers while carrying the Soviet hammer and sickle into the heart of Berlin.

Vehicle sections, like manning machine gun turrets on a Black Cat gunship for a strafing run, or blasting lookout towers in a Soviet tank, are diverting side-dishes that keep the footsoldiering from becoming too stale. Each chapter introduction intersperses real WWII footage with strategic overlays, but the plot doesn't aim for historical accuracy as much as it does mood-setting.

These moments show shades of the subtlety and charm we saw in *CoD4*, but your guide characters feel more throw-away than Captain Price did, and there's no haunt-



VITALS GENRE: FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER DEVELOPER: TREYARCH PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION REQUIRED: P4 3GHZ, 512MB RAM (1GB VISTA), 256MB GEFORCE 660GT/RADEON 1600XT VIDEOCARD, 8GB HD SPACE RECOMMENDED: DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, GEFORCE 9800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD, BROADBAND INTERNET MAX PLAYERS: 32 ESRB: M

ZOMBIE FEVER SPREADS

Wii 4 Dead? Not quite. Like the charming Ragtime Warfare mode in CoD4, Nazi Zombies is a campy minigame that plays on our greatest fear: undead fascism. You and up to three allies fend off waves of infected Axis troops inside a small bunker, sprinting between windows to cover every entrance. Racking up headshots and blasting off limbs earns you points that can be spent on weapons and ammo, or to repair the bunker's wooden barricades. Like the campaign, the simple mechanics lack the depth to keep you interested for very long; a few more environments would've made this extra a little more worthwhile.



/// "Das braaaaains." Killing Nazis might get old, but killing zombies? Never. ///



/// Calling in artillery is a great way to knock down delicious coconuts, and clear pesky MG bunkers. ///

ing jog through Chernobyl or jaw-dropping twist (but admittedly, twists are hard to come by when working in the confines of history books). Raw quantity out-prioritizes cinematic polish here, meaning that most of the chapters are filled with the same bland bunkers and jungle passes that you've shot up for the past decade—passable, but not impressive. Huge numbers of predictable enemies populate these environs, usually finding their way to the nearest sandbag to issue suppressing fire but failing to actually utilize cover, or standing a foot away from your equally dumb allies while exchanging fire at close range, oblivious to the bayonets attached to their guns. The first few times you get banzai-charged by Japanese ambushers, it's startling: they'll spring from camouflaged pits or hop up from a pile of dead soldiers. Let one of the shock troops get in your grill and you'll have a narrow two seconds to jab the melee key before you get gutted. The tenth, twentieth, and fortieth times, you've got a

pretty good idea of what's coming.

What believability the AI fodder lacks in life, they make up for in death. Nazis crawl when they're wounded, grabbing their sidearms in desperation while they're hunched on the ground. A well-placed round sends a limb flying; head shots eject more blood than a bulimic vampire. Again, this brutality plays directly into four-player co-op, where kill scoring gels with achievements (shoot 30 tree snipers, get simultaneous melee kills with another player, get three kills by shooting the tank of an enemy flamethrower, etc.) that rank up your online profile. There's also a hidden "Death Card" in each mission that unlocks a cheat, like headshots that explode enemies, turning your bullets into paintballs, sapping life from targets, or firing explosive pistol rounds.

Really, it's an assortment of tactile, almost musical weapons that makes this work. *WaW*'s BAR, Arisaka rifle, Mosin Nagant, MP44, and others fire like steel



typewriters, flicking spent brass, jabbing and clicking as their mechanisms animate like carriage returns. The guns' punchy recoil makes the simple encounter structure (enter an area, pop targets until you see "objective completed," advance, rinse, repeat) consistently rewarding.

ALL THIS CONTENT POINTS to a more casual, less taxing experience, one you'll queue up over a few weekends with three pals, competitively trying to out-hero each other while points rack up. *CoD4*'s engine certainly lends a hand, rendering particle effects and animations at a high clip, but the environs and cinematic presentation aren't as on-target.

The experience is perhaps best summed up when a buddy in co-op grabs a flamethrower and paints a line of heat into a machine gun bunker, and the game cues some heavy metal power chords. In other words, you're mostly shooting a lot of German- or Japanese-textured bull's-eyes, but if you're able to embrace *World at War* for what it is—a straightforward, arcade-style, rapid-fire experience—these one-trick AI traits fade into the backdrop of the empowered feeling you get from knocking down enemy after enemy. /// EVAN LAHTI ///

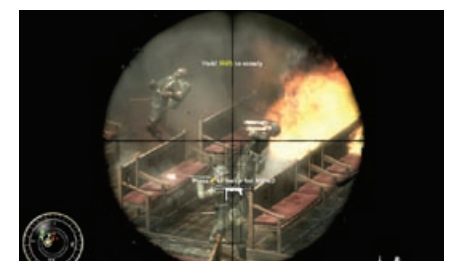
ALL THIS CONTENT POINTS TO A MORE CASUAL, LESS TAXING EXPERIENCE, ONE YOU'LL QUEUE UP OVER A FEW WEEKENDS WITH THREE PALS, COMPETITIVELY TRYING TO OUT-HERO EACH OTHER.



/// Unlimited flamethrower ammo encourages you to be aggressive and smoke out ambushers. ///



/// It's nice to be storming a beach other than Normandy for a change. ///



/// Flamethrower fuel backpacks really make a sniper's day. Let's play pop goes the Nazi! ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Four-player co-op; punchy weapons; quality *CoD4* engine graphics.

LOWS// Lacks nuance and mission variety; AI is unapologetically simple; forgettable set pieces and characters; repeating encounter types.

BOTTOM LINE// *World at War* takes two steps forward, one step back with larger-scale shootouts, more vehicles, and a longer campaign than *CoD4* (with co-op play), but a less polished experience overall.



++ GOOD ++

GTA is all about violence, sex, drugs, music, and fast cars. In short, it's the American Dream.



We gonna hit up the roof. You clear out the floor above first, money.

GRAND THEFT AUTO IV

THE FOURTH *GTA* IS ABSURDLY DETAILED AND ENGROSSING ON ALMOST EVERY LEVEL

Of all the extensions of experience that games provide, it's the sandbox gangster sims of the *GTA* series that are the most voluminous and detailed. These open-ended tales within modern cities come complete with their

EDITOR'S NOTE

Consider this part one of our *GTA IV* review, covering only the single-player campaign. At press time multiplayer and integrated video clip uploading were not usable, so we're going to have to save that discussion, and our final score, for next issue.

own world: a world of automotive action, gunplay, fashion, romance, intrigue, comedy, lunacy, and drunkenness. The *GTA* games are *more* than the sum of their substantial parts. These are games that set out to be huge, not simply in popularity, but in their content.

GTA IV is no exception: this huge game

is its details. It brims over with them, as if the Rockstar team went out of control and had to be actively constrained from their ceaseless, imaginative world-building. Walk down a street and you can't help being impressed with the litter in the alleyways, the changing weather, or the absurd satirical chatter that goes on between pedestrians. Sprawling, funny, grim, consistent, violent, even sexy; it is as *alive* and human as all great games would aspire to be. People who've compared this game to *Goodfellas* and *Citizen Kane* are kind of missing the point: it's not the story the world contains



The cops won't bother you as long as you're playing nice...which won't be that long.

that matters, it's the world that contains the story. Rockstar has realized that if it builds a supremely impressive cityscape for the action to take place in, then everything else takes care of itself.

As for what goes on in that world, I have two words: music and murder. You'll see what I mean as soon as you start cycling



Stealing hot cars is extremely easy—it's just a matter of knowing where to look for them.

through the radio stations in any of the many vehicles you'll appropriate. From Chet Baker to Suzie Q to Aphex Twin, the soundtrack alone is a heterogeneous mash of musical culture. Chasing down bikers listening to smoky ambient electronica, or simply catching up with the "news" from the Liberty City area is entertainment in itself. At one point I cruised up to the pier and found myself listening to jazz and watching the sun set. How many other games can manage that?

The tale this time is the story of Niko Bellic, the stony-faced protagonist who acts out your aggression onscreen. *GTA IV* places you in the life—partly in control, but partly as spectator via cut-scenes—of this Balkan immigrant to the United States. He is a profoundly damaged human being, dehumanized by war. A strange sort of sociopath, Niko wants love, comforts, and comradeship, but he does not flinch at astonishingly cold violence. You can't get away from it: you're going to kill people. A lot of people. It doesn't make a lot of sense, but it's amazingly entertaining.

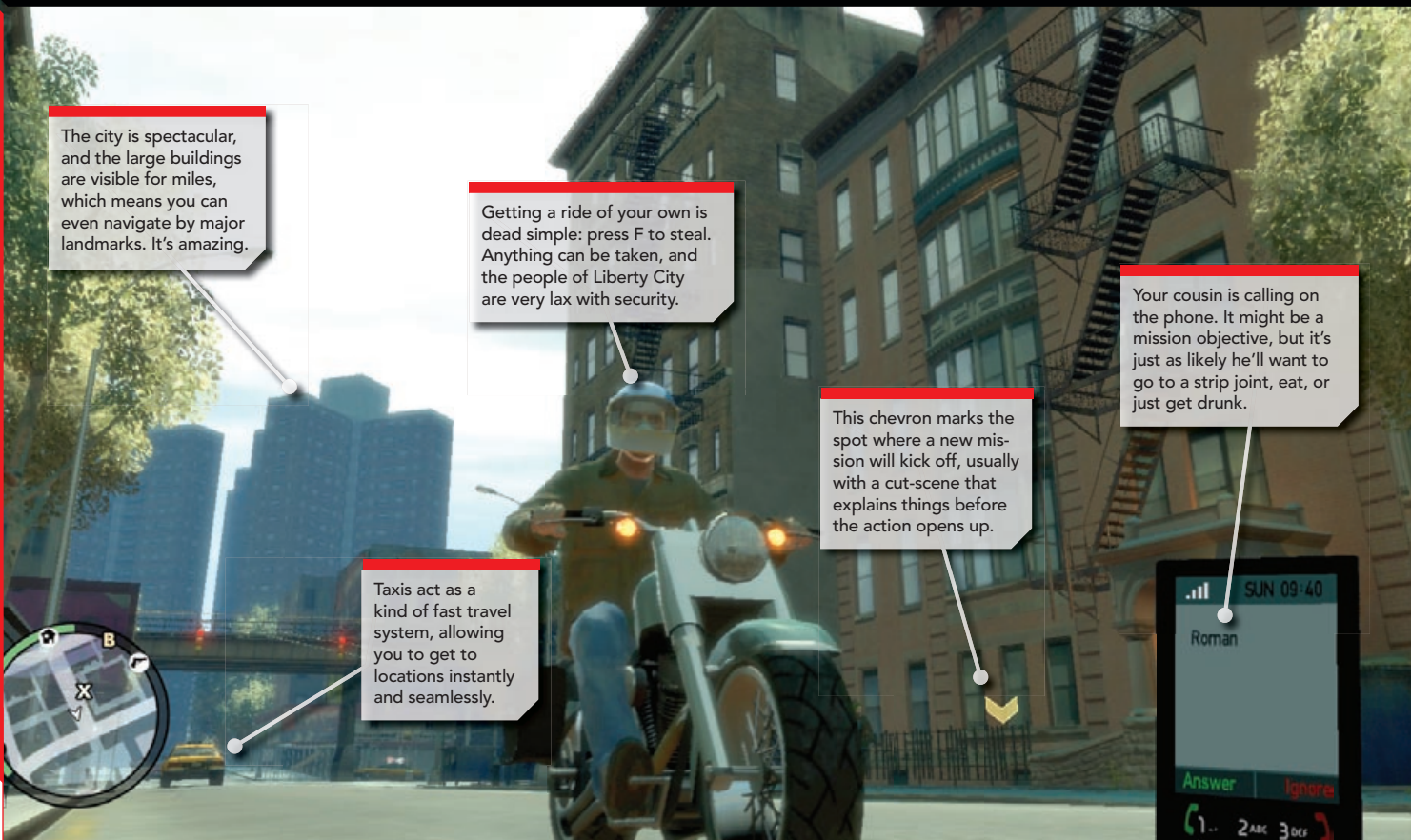
SELF-MADE PSYCHO

Niko starts at the bottom, and the only way to go is up. The story follows both your climb through the ranks of Liberty City's mob,

She probably stole that lollipop from a child.



Starting out in *GTA IV*'s amazingly detailed and lifelike Liberty City is weirdly similar to actually being dumped in an unfamiliar city in real life.



and your quest for revenge. Niko's cousin Roman, who starts the game as the bullied owner of a small cab firm, is along for the ride, and remains hopelessly optimistic through all the horrors the pair face. Without him, you begin to realize, you'd be completely directionless.

And you need direction, since once you're dumped into the world proper there's a wealth of options. I started out by just watching TV in the apartment. "Republican Space Rangers" was on—not a particularly subtle satire of American foreign policy. But for the most part you're probably going to be following the various missions the mad cast of characters delivers to you. They'll call (or text) you on your cell phone, or you can find them at locations clearly marked on the map. To get around you can commit the game's titular offense at the touch of a button, but fast-travel options like cabs and subways get you there without the hassle. On foot you really get a measure of the place: this Liberty City, based on modern New York, is as close to reality as any videogame illusion has ever been.

HELL ON WHEELS

You're probably going to drive at some point; thankfully, it's an excellent option when playing on mouse and keyboard. (Only the motorcycles are tricky to handle.) You'll find yourself picking favorite cars to steal as

you figure out how things handle. I became obsessed with tracking down and stealing sports cars, since they handled so well and easily outpaced the cops. That said, I rapidly shed my near-suicidal videogame driving habits and began to behave when I realized it really was usually easier *not* to use the handbrake on every corner and to pay the toll-booth on the freeway than to be bogged down by raging cop cars.

Once you reach your destination there's a good possibility that you'll do some fighting. This starts off with a few punches and kicks, and soon escalates to gunfights with pistols, shotguns, SMGs, Molotovs, and eventually, sniper and assault rifles. The action works well, but problems arise when you try to take cover. Hitting Q hugs Niko against nearby walls, cars, or other solid objects. This works most of the time, except on the odd occa-



/// Combat works well with the mouse, for the most part, which is a good thing considering how often you'll use it. Niko can't seem to go five minutes without busting a cap in some fool. ///

URBAN EXCURSIONS

■ THREE (MOSTLY) LEGAL THINGS TO DO IN LIBERTY CITY



/// Ah, the hidden ramp: a classic of *GTA* city design. All around the world there are places where a speedy car can gain some big air and crash through stuff with splendid effect. ///



/// Why not use the Internet to look for love? Actually, you're far more likely to just end up using it to arrange the theft of cars for your hormonally enriched buddy, Brucie. ///



/// Or you could just get drunk with Roman at a strip club. Getting drunk makes driving a car a bit tricky—and in the game, too! We don't recommend it to anyone, not even in *GTA IV*. ///

sions when you seem unable to lean around particular corners, or when faced with doors that always swing shut in your face and stop you from shooting the bad guys. This is the one part of the game that feels undeveloped, but it's not too hard if you remember to stock up on body armor and bullets.

After a few missions, a sense of sameness starts to kick in. They're almost all along the

lines of drive somewhere, shoot someone, perhaps chase them through the city, and start over if you mess up. You can't skip a mission if you fail, since missions drive the overall plot. Worse, there's no quicksave, just an option to repeat the whole thing—house-keeping errands and driving missions, too.

Fortunately they're all bookended with *GTA IV*'s characters, which ensure that this is one

of the few games in existence that didn't have me clamoring to skip past the cut-scenes.

BYO CARNAGE

It's up to you to add variety. Perhaps what's most entertaining about all the recent *GTA* games is how the missions and the sandbox world end up colliding. For example, a shootout in a warehouse attracted the atten-



/// Firing from a car is a good way to kill fast-moving enemies from cover, but it also attracts a whole bunch of cops real quick. ///

tion of cops, and the escape meant killing police, stealing a car, then heading into the city to lose them. I was soon involved in a gun battle with six cop cars, and all my tires were blown. (Ludicrous, escalating carnage is this particular series' trademark.) I bailed out, accomplice in tow, and stole a truck. We headed up onto the freeway, still firing wildly out of the windows. Sadly, the escape was not to be—a headlong crash sent me flying through the windshield, off the overpass, and head-first into a beach 30 feet below... time to restart.

Crucially, *GTA IV* has discarded many of

the annoying role-playing elements of *GTA: San Andreas*, such as fitness, and simply focused on the matter of there being loads of things to do and see. As I mentioned earlier, Liberty City is based on New York, and each of the four game areas is based on a different borough. You start out in a Brooklyn analog, and travel into Queens, The Bronx, and Manhattan (or Algonquin, as it is known in the game world). Coney Island and the

Statue of Liberty are there, and Rockstar's version of the Empire State Building looms over the skyline.

TARGET-RICH ENVIRONMENT

It's the richness of the city that really satisfies. It's a massive place, teeming with life. It's as close to the "living city" ideal that these games have been aiming for that we're likely to see in the next few years. Dozens of random interactions take place with every trek down the street, and the options for getting into trouble are near infinite. It's also dripping with sideline amusements: the dia-

logue of the burger-diner waitress, the weird performance-art shows at the clubs, even some standup comedy from Ricky Gervais. While you discover some of this simply by cruising around doing the core missions, it's the distractions of going out with Roman and your girlfriends that really make the game world feel deep. Although incredibly simplistic, they're often oddly touching.

I do have some other grumbles. The first is the additional fluff that sits between you and the game. You need to log into Rockstar Social Club to go online—fair enough, I suppose—but then you need to log into Games For Windows Live, too—it's a bizarre hindrance, and totally unnecessary—exactly the opposite of the kind of streamlining we expect from games today. I also experienced some major framerate hiccups. It was nothing fatal, and the game looks incredible on a GeForce 8800GT and a Core 2 Duo processor, but the lag was noticeable. Otherwise, *GTA IV* is one of the rare excellent console-to-PC ports. ///JIM ROSSIGNOL ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Tune in next month for our impressions of *GTA IV*'s multiplayer modes, and the final verdict.



/// Lara is now able to target two enemies at once. Also depicted here is her ass. ///

TOMB RAIDER: UNDERWORLD

■ WHO NEEDS THE MOVIES WHEN WE'VE GOT LARA?



I don't know about you, but I left *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* last summer hating everybody involved, including myself. I waited 19 years for *that*? If they decide to dust off the fedora once more, the production should be handed over to Crystal Dynamics, the California-based studio that

revitalized another adventuring franchise headed for the glue factory with *Tomb Raider: Legend*, remastered the original game in *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, and has outdone itself with the most majestic and enjoyable chapter yet in *Tomb Raider: Underworld*. *Underworld* begins in middle of its story, when an explosion that appears to have been triggered by Lara herself blows most of her personal effects out the windows of the ruined Croft manor. Her once-faithful assistant Zip even fires off a few rounds at her before the story reverts to the previous week, which finds Lara about to dive into the Mediterranean Sea in search of clues to the whereabouts of Avalon, the legendary resting place of King Arthur, and the place where Lara's nemesis, Amanda, claims Lara's mother may be trapped. But along the way Lara will find a mystery left unsolved by her father that will lead her on a quest for no less than Thor's Hammer, through Thailand, Southern Mexico, a stronghold in the Arctic Sea, and even the undiscovered depths of the Croft manor.

SO MANY ELEMENTS CONTRIBUTE in different and subtle ways to make *Underworld* such a lavishly engrossing, sensual, and *physical* experience—more so than any *Tomb Raider* game that's come before it. Lara's animations, for example, so graceful and fluid in *Legend*, are almost balletic now as she perches precariously on top of pillars or tries to retain her balance as she crosses a narrow beam (both are new abilities). Her clothes become streaked with grime and mud as she scales towering statues and ascends a tall and narrow niche by chimney-jumping between the walls on both sides. In humid climates, sweat glistens on her skin and gradually soaks through her clothes (so no wonder she prefers high shorts and lower-cut tops). The keyboard and mouse controls are remarkably well executed as well as remappable, but simply aren't suited to Lara's evolving grace and distinctly analog feel the way that a gamepad is, especially when she's jumping backwards from a ledge to the tiniest promontory behind her at 4 o'clock.

But it's the puzzles that elevate *Underworld* to new heights. Massive, dazzling, intimidating: You



/// And everybody thinks American tourists are obnoxious. ///

THE STEADY, THOUGHTFUL DIRECTION THROUGHOUT *TOMB RAIDER: UNDERWORLD* MAKES PATIENT AND TENACIOUS EXPLORATION PAY OFF AGAIN AND AGAIN WITH UNFORGETTABLE MOMENTS.

have to take a step back just to admire most of them—such as one that pits you against the slithering of a kraken's tentacles around the pillars of an underground cavern, and another composed from silhouettes cast by the light of a furnace—before you begin breaking these epic contraptions down into their component puzzles and defeating them one at a time.

UNDERWORLD FEATURES engaging battles with cunning beasts and monsters (including skeletal thralls that must be shattered before they regenerate) that exhibit pack-hunting behavior, but combat with bipeds and humans remains abysmal. Crystal Dynamics even seems to acknowledge the weakness on an almost self-deprecating level that has Lara using a mighty weapon to bat away enemies as if they were gnats. But there's far less human combat in this game than in others in the series, and in heavy firefights Lara can pull off slow-motion vaults over enemies that culminate in gooshy, lethal headshots.

The story is classic *Tomb Raider*—mixing familiar and evocative legend with villains who would twirl their mustaches if they had any—but it builds well on the Croft canon with the requisite shockers, a genuinely horrific moment, and a couple

of rogues from Lara's past because, well, she does have quite a past. More important, though, is the steady, thoughtful direction that makes patient and tenacious exploration pay off again and again with unforgettable moments: a camera that follows Lara through a curtain of water; effortlessly sliding a half-ton gear into place underwater; dangling from a handhold on the side of a column that extends hundreds of feet downward into darkness—while the gorgeous soundtrack sweeps the excitement forward.

AN OCCASIONALLY frustrating and spastic camera, as well as a puzzle sequence in Xibalba that felt incongruously unambitious compared to the circus of fear described in the Popol Vuh (those Mayans knew how to party) almost cost *Underworld* our Editors' Choice award, but by the time I'd reached the superb finish, I'd had more than 14 hours of what I'd gone to see that *Crystal Skull* crap for.

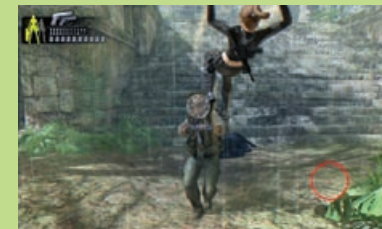
But, it's up to you: Would you rather watch a Harley chase through Yale University, or ride your motorcycle at full throttle down into the Mayan equivalent of Hell and swing Thor's Hammer at the bitch who just tried to kill you?

/// LOGAN DECKER ///

THE BALLAD OF THE ADRENALINE HEADSHOT



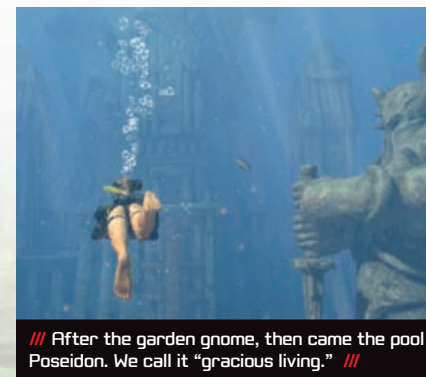
/// The solid yellow Lara icon means that her adrenaline is peaking... ///



/// ...which allows Lara to vault over her enemies in slow-mo... ///



/// ...and, using the targeting reticule, execute a lethal headshot. ///



/// After the garden gnome, then came the pool Poseidon. We call it "gracious living." ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Lara's control and animations are phenomenal; fantastic puzzles; improved animal AI.

LOWS// Combat with humans remains tedious.

BOTTOM LINE// Bold, imaginative, and astonishing—*Underworld* feels like an adventure from the first minute to the last.

0% BETTER >> 100% **90%**

♦♦ EDITORS' CHOICE ♦♦

■ VITALS ■ GENRE: THIRD-PERSON SHOOTER DEVELOPER: CRYSTAL DYNAMICS PUBLISHER: EIDOS REQUIRED: P4 3GHZ, 1GB RAM, GEFORCE 6800GT/RADEON 1800XT VIDEOCARD, 8GB HD SPACE RECOMMENDED: CORE 2 DUO 2.2GHZ, 2GB RAM, GEFORCE 9800GT/RADEON HD 4800 VIDEOCARD, XBOX 360 GAMEPAD MAX PLAYERS: 1 ESRB: T



25 Hutchinson AG

There are some Bond moments that feel right, like this tribute level to *Golden Eye*.

QUANTUM OF SOLACE

BOND IS BACK. SPECIFICALLY, BOND FROM *CASINO ROYALE*

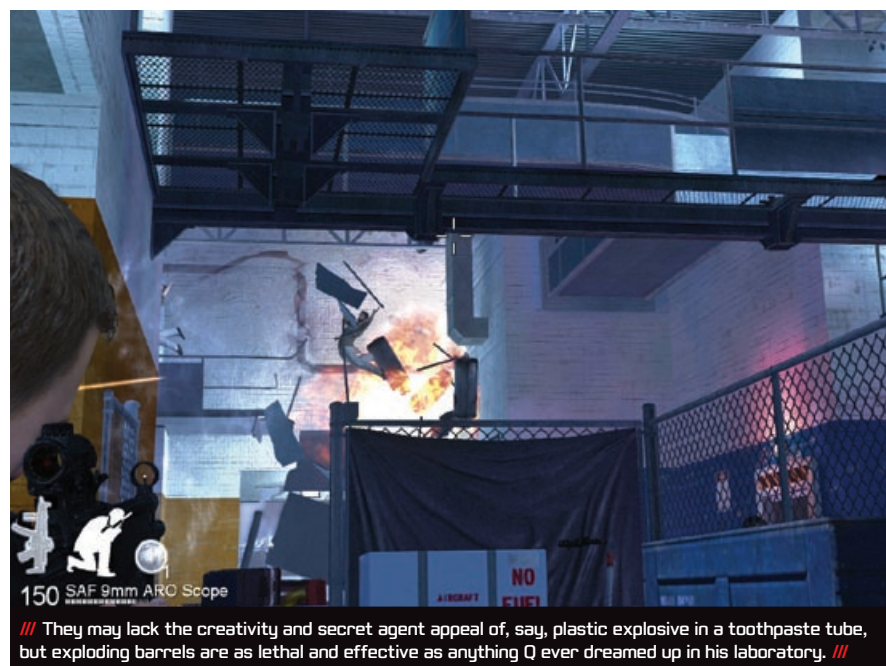
Treyarch at least understands that people buy a Bond game for one reason: shooting foreigners in the head with a silenced PP7. What it doesn't understand is that when it says *Quantum of Solace* on the box, we expect a *QoS* game. This game, on the other hand, manages the rather impressive feat of being based largely on

an entirely different Bond film.

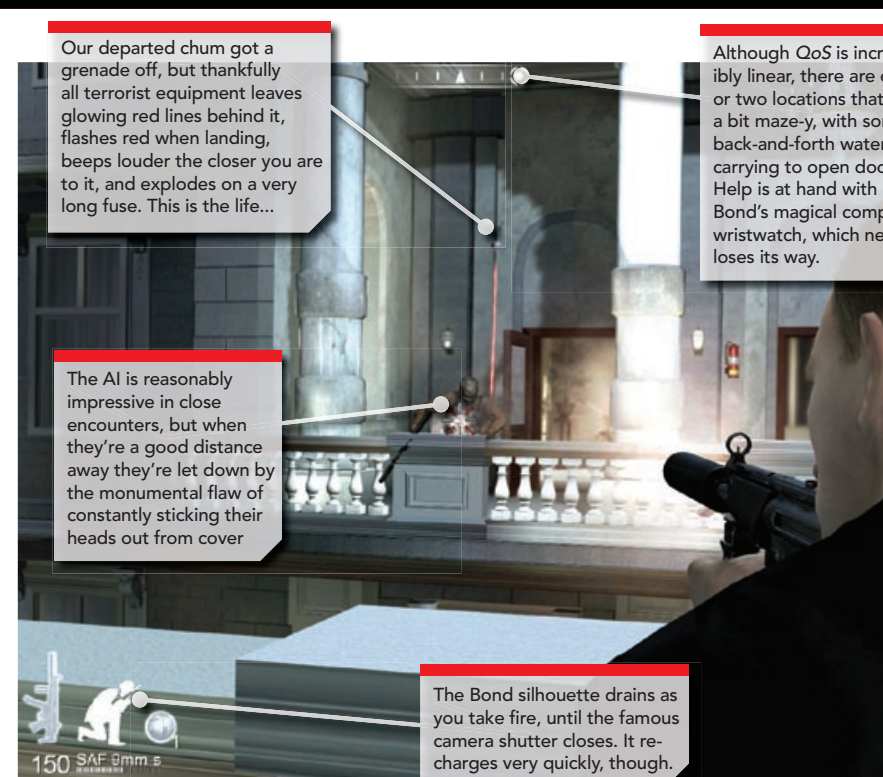
In simple mathematical terms, two-thirds *Casino Royale* + one-third *QoS* = one 007: *QoS* videogame. A few *QoS* missions get you started, then you'll get 10 *Casino Royale* missions in a row, before a single *QoS* level to finish you off. You almost suspect it's a monumental gag, seeing as the movie itself is, by all accounts, an action-exploda-smacka-jumpa-thon. It certainly speaks volumes about how cooperative the movie studio was with Treyarch's need to, you know, have a basic clue about what the movie would contain.

But *QoS* has one more big surprise in store: it's not substandard crap. Standard, yes, and with a massive case of tunnel vision in its level design, but also a solid shooter with good set pieces, decent AI, and even the odd neat idea. If ever there was an engine that forced you to make a particular type of game, it's the *Call Of Duty 4* engine. Because this is *CoD* in a tux—and unfortunately, it's Treyarch's *CoD* in a tux, rather than Infinity Ward's. Dalton instead of Connery.

The first level plunks you in a mansion garden, where a couple of bad men pop up from behind a bush and start shooting at you. Rather than a potentially simpler stealth path, Bond is forced on a frontal assault path



They may lack the creativity and secret agent appeal of, say, plastic explosive in a toothpaste tube, but exploding barrels are as lethal and effective as anything Q ever dreamed up in his laboratory.



Our departed chum got a grenade off, but thankfully all terrorist equipment leaves glowing red lines behind it, flashes red when landing, beeps louder the closer you are to it, and explodes on a very long fuse. This is the life...

Although *QoS* is incredibly linear, there are one or two locations that are a bit maze-y, with some back-and-forth water carrying to open doors. Help is at hand with Bond's magical compass wristwatch, which never loses its way.

The AI is reasonably impressive in close encounters, but when they're a good distance away they're let down by the monumental flaw of constantly sticking their heads out from cover

The Bond silhouette drains as you take fire, until the famous camera shutter closes. It recharges very quickly, though.

through the mansion where every room, including bathrooms, are full of terrorists. The usual Bond staples—big public buildings, construction sites, boats—are all featured. Enemies are occasionally smart cookies, grenading you from cover or attempting flanking maneuvers; having four or five charging your location shouting, "It's Bond, get him!" is unnerving in a good way. God knows why they always seem to be sitting on explosive boxes, or dawdling next to propane tanks.

GO THROUGH six or seven firefights of this ilk, maybe do a few quick-time events on the way, finish with a big set piece, rinse and repeat. That's the meat of *QoS*, although among those big finishes are some adrenaline-pumping escapes and one or two flourishes, like sniping a bomb maker you've been chasing as he dashes to set off his charges. "Spot on, Bond," someone very English chirps in your ear. However, there are many more quick-time event brawls, minigames, and the eventually wearying rounds of spot-the-exploding-object. And there's one horrendous helicopter boss that on anything above normal difficulty is mouse-smashingly tough. After a while, the formula does begin to grate.

On that note, the controls aren't ideal, thanks mainly to what we will call the *Gears*

of *War* factor. Maybe it's just fat fingers, but having to right-strafe and hit E to take cover at the same time gets messy in the big firefights. There's some form of compensation in being able to aim for the next piece of cover from your current one, but it's a real pity that one of the game's slickest features, the seamless switch between the first and third person perspective, is a little more hampered than on console.

If all this sounds negative, it's only because of the context. Playing around as Bond for a few hours is fun, and that silenced PP7 and the odd big bang make it a good analog for a popcorn movie. But you're only playing around: you know you'll be going home to *Far Cry 2*. And with games like that setting the FPS pace, what would have been an excellent effort a few years ago just hits basic competence now. If the best that can be said about *Quantum of Solace* is that it's OK, then for a game based on Ian Fleming's creation that's damning enough.

FINAL PCGAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Smart AI; good level design; occasional clever objectives.

LOWS// More *Casino Royale* than *Quantum of Solace*; repetitious missions; difficult cover controls.

BOTTOM LINE// *QoS* is a competent shooter rather than the usual licensed schlock, but it should have come out with the last Bond film.



VITALS GENRE: FIRST/THIRD-PERSON SHOOTER
DEVELOPER: TREYARCH PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
REQUIRED: 1.8GHZ DUAL-CORE CPU, 512 MB RAM, 128MB GEFORCE 6600/RADEON 9800 PRO, 8GB HD SPACE
RECOMMENDED: 1GB RAM, GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850
MAX PLAYERS: 2-12 ESRB: T



/// Fighting on walls means doing battle with Spider-Man's deadliest foe: the camera. ///

SPIDER-MAN: WEB OF SHADOWS

■ AND WHAT A TANGLED WEB IT IS

The saddest part about *Spider-Man: Web of Shadows* is that the only people willing to endure such a sloppy port are hard-core Spider-Man fans—the same group to whom the plot will make the least sense.

AT LEAST THE DEVELOPER got one essential component right: web swinging is the most enjoyable aspect of the game, even if you're swinging in an extremely bland open-world version of New York City. You swing about busting thugs, the Kingpin's generic techno-troopers, and the occasional supervillain until an alien symbiote takeover has you battling legions of zombie-type things. Combat gets repetitive quickly (credit terrible mission designs that have you using the same move 20 times in a row), though once you've unlocked the skill tree things liven up a bit. You can also switch from Spidey's standard red and blue suit to the black one at the push of a button, which gives you access to an alternate set of moves. Combat animations are an exception to the game's not-so-hot graphics—Spidey moves exactly as he should.



/// Because Wolverine has to be in everything Marvel does, he plays a prominent role in the story. ///

At key points in the story you're given the option to take a good or evil route; the decision actually does have some impact on the story, even if the evil path seems wildly out of character for Spider-Man. (Speaking of, what's with this horribly miscast voice actor?) Those moments are often preceded by interactive scripted events that seem to ignore your key presses half the time, and if you fail at any point, you're forced to start the whole interminable sequence from the beginning, including unskippable cut-scenes. Other lows include an appallingly clumsy menu system (that's no picnic on a gamepad either), devastating frame-rate slowdowns any time fire or water (from broken fire hydrants) are on the screen, as well as mission and graphics glitches that appear throughout, making *Web of Shadows* difficult to recommend to even the true believers. /// DAN STAPLETON ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT



■ **VITALS** ■ GENRE: ACTION DEVELOPER: SHABA/TREYARCH PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION REQUIRED: 3GHZ CORE 2 DUO CPU, 1GB RAM (2GB VISTA), GEFORCE 7900/RADEON X1900 VIDEOCARD, 8GB HD SPACE RECOMMENDED: 2GB RAM, GEFORCE 8800GTX/RADEON 3870 VIDEOCARD MAX PLAYERS: 1 ESRB RATING: T



/// Powering up Gabe's attacks is easier on your space bar this time around. ///

PENNY ARCADE ADVENTURES: ON THE RAIN-SLICK PRECIPICE OF DARKNESS—EPISODE II

■ ROUND TWO PACKS BETTER COMBAT BUT FEWER CHUCKLES

Picking up where the first episode concluded, the second episode of the *Penny Arcade Adventures* begins with your still-homeless character (you can either import your old character or start a new one at the same advanced level) brandishing a new gardening implement and teaming up once again with 1922-era Gabe and Tycho to track down the giant robot that crushed your house. *Episode II* is a slightly longer run, around five hours, and is packed with a greater concentration of adventure-style puzzles punctuating the unchallenging RPG-style turn-based combat.

This chapter's bizarre story unfolds throughout a very linear adventure structure—even though you have lots of (often intensely profane) dialogue options



and can choose which location to travel to, very few things can be done out of sequence. On the other hand, very little content from the last game is recycled, so *Episode II* is an almost completely new adventure.

THE MOST NOTABLE improvement over the previous episode is that none of the mini-games used to charge up your team's special attacks require you to hammer the space bar as fast as you can. The new games are all about timing, like Gabe's *Guitar Hero*-esque game of tapping direction keys that results in a flurry of devastating punches.

But with the exception of the robot monkey fight, this episode just isn't as laugh-out-loud funny as the first, and there's a shortage of memorable new characters. The finale, however, is excellent, and has the feel of an epic battle. *Episode II* isn't a great starting point for newcomers, but continues to be worthy of *PA* fans' time. /// DAN STAPLETON ///



/// You spend a lot of time in an insane asylum. ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT



■ VITALS ■ GENRE: ADVENTURE DEVELOPER: HOTHEAD PUBLISHER: HOTHEAD REQUIRED: PIII 1GHZ, 512MB RAM, GEFORCE FX 5200/RADEON 9500 64MB VIDEOCARD, 350MB HD SPACE, INTERNET CONNECTION RECOMMENDED: P4 1.5GHZ, 768MB RAM, GEFORCE 6600/RADEON X800 128MB VIDEOCARD MAX PLAYERS: 1 ESRB: M DRM: ONLINE ACTIVATION REQUIRED; 3 INSTALLS; NONREVOCABLE



/// Lightning blasts, the one attempt at innovation, have failed to jump-start our *Peggle* addiction. ///

PEGGLE NIGHTS

■ OUR ENTHUSIASM DIMS ALONG WITH THE LIGHTS

Perhaps it was unwise to have such high hopes for a sequel named after *Baywatch Nights*. But this is *Peggle*: it turned firing a ball at some pegs into an experience so instantly entertaining, tactile, and dramatic that a small crowd forms when you play it.

But of *Peggle Nights*' 60 new levels, the first 50—50!—stick to the same powers, the same characters, and the same mechanics as the first game. Changing the background art doesn't significantly change the experience; *Peggle* is about powers, and re-using the old ones just reminds us how dull some of them were.

ONLY FIVE LEVELS ARE

built specifically for it, but the new power is one of the best. The first peg you hit shoots a lightning bolt in the direction of the free-ball bucket, zapping all pegs in between, even as your ball continues to bounce about. It gets you working out the most devastating straight lines across the board, timing your shot with the bucket's position. There's also one fun new idea in the Challenge modes: three levels that combine the Fireball, Pyramid, and Flipper powers to make a crude facsimile of pinball. Great ideas, PopCap. Now where are the rest? The other challenge modes

suffer from *Peggle*'s usual curse: the harder they make it, the more dependent you are on the randomized designation of orange pegs that occurs when you start the level.

We've all played *Peggle* as much as we care to, and we can do so again for free. Replaying *Peggle* highlights its limitations more than its joys, and getting one new power for a few measly levels doesn't warrant charging for it all over again.

/// TOM FRANCIS ///



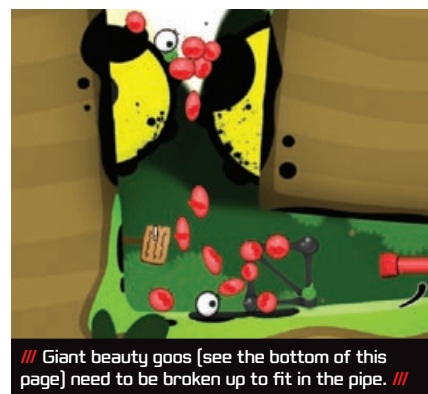
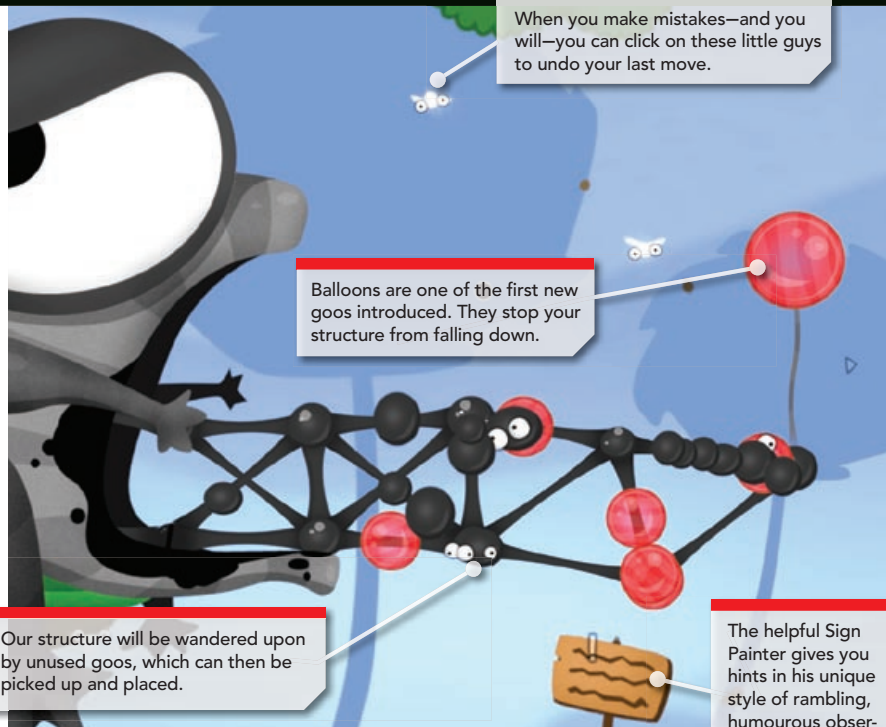
/// You can hang it next to your online college diploma. ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT



++ ABOVE AVERAGE ++

■ VITALS ■ GENRE: PUZZLE DEVELOPER: POPCAP PUBLISHER: POPCAP REQUIRED: 700MHZ CPU, 256MB RAM, 16MB VIDEOCARD, 29MB HD SPACE, INTERNET CONNECTION RECOMMENDED: A MUCH BETTER PC, BUT NOT FOR THIS MAX PLAYERS: 2 ESRB RATING: N/A DRM: ONLINE ACTIVATION; 5 ACTIVATION LIMIT; NON-REVOCABLE



WORLD OF GOO

IF TIM BURTON MADE A RIDICULOUSLY GOOD PUZZLE GAME, IT WOULD LOOK A LOT LIKE THIS



It's rare that reviewers must beware of spoilers in a puzzle game, but in this case, I'd hate for you to play *World of Goo* and miss out on the joy of discovering them yourself. Every moment—not just finding solutions—is a delight.

EVERYTHING GROWS FROM THE idea of picking up little black goo-balls and placing them near one another to form wiggling structures of squishy struts, but it's so much more. At its core, *WoG* a physics-based puzzle game centered on structural engineering. Each level gives you a limited number of goos, a required number you have to save, and a slurping pipe exit to build toward. Completing a level means using goos to build a structure toward that pipe, while having enough unused goos left over to feed into the pipe.

Across four relentlessly witty and imaginative chapters and an epilogue, *WoG* introduces new obstacles and

new types of goo. You're constantly battling gravity to build a structure that can support its own weight, but you're also building around, under, and over spinning blades or spiked walls or flaming pits. As new goos are introduced, levels become increasingly complex.

EACH ADDITION IS EXPLAINED

to you by the funny, oblique tips left on each level by the helpful but unseen Sign Painter. For example, that's how you learn to use balloon goos to raise a string of black goos higher at one end, creating a slope and causing a giant goo to roll forward and break apart into smaller goos that can then be sucked through the pipe. Puzzles never require luck, and they're never frustrating. The result is that you're constantly feeling like some sort of mad architectural genius.

Upon completing all of the levels, you can either go back and try to save even more goo balls, or you can focus your

PUZZLES NEVER REQUIRE LUCK, AND THEY'RE NEVER FRUSTRATING. THE RESULT IS FEELING LIKE SOME SORT OF MAD ARCHITECTURAL GENIUS.

efforts on the World of Goo Corporation mode in which you build a tower as high as you can to compete against an online scoreboard.

In case this glowing review renders your expectations unrealistically high, here's the negative: sometimes, when there are a lot of goos in an area, it can be hard to quickly pick up the one you want. That's all I've got—the rest is pure gold (or goo?). **/// GRAHAM SMITH ///**

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Brilliant concept; creative puzzle design; great sense of humor; only \$20.

LOWS// Difficult to select the goo you're after.

BOTTOM LINE// *World of Goo* is a delightful puzzle classic that will challenge and simulate without frustrating.

0% BETTER >> 100% **93%**

++ EDITORS' CHOICE ++

VITALS GENRE: PUZZLE DEVELOPER: 2D BOY PUBLISHER: 2D BOY REQUIRED: 1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, DIRECTX 9 COMPATIBLE VIDEOCARD, 100MB HD SPACE RECOMMENDED: RUNS GREAT ON REQUIRED SPECS MAX PLAYERS: 1 ESRB: E



/// Gym class is one of the few good lessons, alternating between wrestling and dodgeball. ///

BULLY: SCHOLARSHIP EDITION

■ ROCKSTAR BEATS UP PC GAMERS, TAKES THEIR LUNCH MONEY

So pupils, what has Rockstar been doing in the two years since *Bully* came out on the PS2? Apparently, adding bugs and removing the offline multi-player mode, and certainly not working hard on mouse/keyboard controls.

You play as 15-year-old deviant Jimmy Hopkins. As his mother goes off on an eight-month honeymoon with her eighth husband, you find yourself on the bottom rung of an extremely rough and unpleasant school. You begin in a relatively large map with a combination of missions and side quests, all the time balancing your position between rival school factions: jocks, nerds, greasers, etc. Despite being called *Bully*, your primary goal is to *stop* the institutionalized bullying in the school. By, er, beating everyone up until they agree with you.

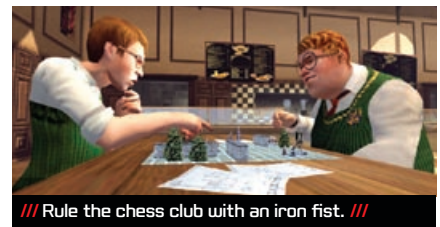
The game-play itself is just splendid. Cycling through the ever-expanding town, fighting via really superb combat, playing at stalls in the local carnival, sneak-

/// Jimmy can't be expected to resist a chance like this. ///

ing around the lunatic asylum, winning the hearts of girls, taking over the various school cliques, watching the town live around you—all marks of Rockstar's genius.

JIMMY HAS TO ATTEND lessons twice a day, or at least not get caught when he ditches class. The idea is great—art classes improve Jimmy's kissing abilities (kissing girls gives you extra health, just like in real life), English gives him more ways to talk his way out of trouble, Chemistry lessons teach him to make his own firecrackers, itching powder, and stink bombs. But most lessons are a tedious affair, either horribly dull quick-time event challenges or standard puzzles that wouldn't grace the worst casual game.

Even worse are the PC controls, which are an utter joke. It was when the game told me to "press [mousewheel up] and [mousewheel down] together" that I gave up and borrowed the office 360 controller. Then a tutorial tip popped up reading, "NOT TRANSLATED," shortly followed by the game telling me I'd failed a mission because someone had been



/// Rule the chess club with an iron fist. ///

beaten up—someone who stood behind me, untouched. A few mission details were also buggy, and for the Biology minigame the controls were *reversed*. None of it was game-ending, but it was obviously frustrating.

Which creates a quandary, because *Bully* on the PC is a dismissive and often broken port of a fantastic game. While the graphics reveal their PS2 roots, the acting is stunning, and it's a pleasure to play. So with these warnings in place, I do recommend it.

/// JOHN WALKER ///

FINAL PCGAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Detailed open world; great voice acting; tons of side-quests.

LOWS// Buggy as sin; terrible mouse and keyboard controls; bad mini-games.

BOTTOM LINE// This half-assed port doesn't do justice to *Bully*, which is at heart a brilliant game of adolescent mischief. Don't even consider playing without a gamepad.

0% BETTER >> 100% **78%**

++ GOOD ++



VITALS ■ GENRE: ACTION ADVENTURE DEVELOPER: ROCKSTAR VANCOUVER PUBLISHER: 2K REQUIREMENTS: 3GHZ CPU, 1GB RAM, GEFORCE 6800/RADEON X1300, 4.7GB HD SPACE RECOMMENDED: DUAL-CORE CPU, 1GB RAM, GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 MAX PLAYERS: 1 ESRB: T



/// Simply walking around provokes constant attacks from hordes of monsters. "I! JUST! WANTED! TO! GO! BUY! SOME! MILK!" ///

SACRED 2: FALLEN ANGEL



■ LIKE HAVING THE REQUIRED PARTS OF AN ACTION-RPG DUMPED IN YOUR LAP

Please, no more enemies! I have little red minimap icons burned into my brain, and my sword-finger hurts. This may be a *Diablo*-style game, but dammit, if you can have too

much of a good thing, you can sure as hell have too many damned monsters trying to rip talons through your sphincter every time you pop down to the corner store.

Fighting the massed armies of darkness is fine when it's in context—somewhere suitably atmospheric, for a proper purpose. In *Sacred 2*, it's relentless. Rats. Bandits. Undead. Boars. Bears. Spiders. Kobolds. Mages. If the grass could hold weapons, it'd want a piece of you. Just getting from A to B is like swimming through piranha-infested molasses, especially since if you die before reaching safety you're yoinked right back to the last spawn point. Don't even ask about the badly timed crashes.

ON THE PLUS SIDE, the core combat itself isn't bad. It's not exceptional, and *Sacred 2* can be oddly laggy for a single-player game, but there's a satisfying "oomph" to it that most *Diablo* fans will be quite happy with. It's nice to be a force to be reckoned with from the start, and the basic business of looting and character development is well done.

The main quest is a different story. *Sacred*'s world is a very dull "Magi-tech" affair, livened up only by some moments

of genuine oddness—like gravestones quoting Katharine Hepburn on death, and at one point, a metal band called Blind Guardian rocking out into a magic staff microphone for an audience of monsters. However, like the monsters, the quest guys just didn't know where to quit. The critical path is buried by an avalanche of random crap to the point that you completely lose track of why you're killing so many things, and by the end of the first chapter you're pretty much just cleaving through armies in the hope that you'll actually turn out to be a hero rather than some random psychopath. Maybe you are...there *are* two endings.

On paper, having lots of stuff is good. In practice, it needs much more care and attention to prevent it all melting into a grey glop of brainless hack-n-slash that defies you to give a rat's ass. That's what separates the good *Diablo* clones from the great ones, and makes *Sacred* constantly struggle to even equal the sum of its parts, never mind be more. **/// RICHARD COBBETT ///**



/// Don't forget to tap the resurrection monoliths. ///



/// The critical path is almost completely buried under all the random side quests. ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Solid combat; powerful from the start; good character development.

LOWS// Muddled story; relentless swarm of enemies; no sense of purpose.

BOTTOM LINE// *Sacred 2* gets the fundamentals right and piles on loads of stuff, but fails to tie it all together.

0% BETTER >> 100% **57%**

++ MERELY OKAY ++

■ **VITALS** ■ GENRE: ACTION/ROLE-PLAYING GAME PUBLISHER: CDV DEVELOPER: ASCARON REQUIRED: P4 2.6GHZ, 1GB RAM, 128MB VIDEOCARD, INTERNET CONNECTION RECOMMENDED: DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, 256MB VIDEOCARD MAX PLAYERS: 16 ESRB: M DRM: ONLINE ACTIVATION; TWO SIMULTANEOUS, REVOCABLE ACTIVATIONS



/// I know what you're thinking, but don't be frightened by the hexes—*King's Bounty* is a great game, honest. ///

KING'S BOUNTY: THE LEGEND

■ GREAT LOVE TRIANGLES OF OUR TIME: THE FROG, THE ZOMBIE, AND ME

It's impossible to say for sure whether this strategy-role-playing game in the mold of *Heroes of Might & Magic* is astoundingly inventive or just plain nuts. Case in point, “wives” are an optional interface element whose sole

purpose is to grant bonuses to my character's army. That these wives, after being dezombified or defrogified, can replace their inventory items with children is either rampantly misogynistic or a stroke of genius. Or both. Whichever it is, *King's Bounty: The Legend* is a game with a very simple structure—perform quests, build armies, kill other armies—that nonetheless manages to be consistently surprising.

THE LEVEL OF INVENTION in this Russian-made wonder is incredible. While strategy skirmishes are its bread and butter, it's far more interested in being an RPG, offering absurdist vignettes within a huge, open high-fantasy world. In between overseeing turn-n-hex-based battles, my Paladin has performed dentistry on a dragon, brought peace to a warring family of toadmen, become a pirate, reunited a talking castle with its girlfriend, and fought a war inside his own belt.

The RPG emphasis is very much the right choice, especially as the battles themselves

can get tiresome despite increasing complexity. There's a singular joy in constructing an army consisting of 98 giant snakes, 206 pirates, 56 Beholders, and 12 cannoneers, but the slightly too long and too frequent fights are sometimes an unwelcome interruption. Between that and the enthusiastic but all-over-the-place translations, it's certainly not a game for everyone. At the same time, it's free from the low-rent production values many associate with Eastern European games: it's slick, it's stable, and it looks wonderful, albeit in a very Warcraftian way.

It's also the game I've enjoyed the most this year, by a comfortable margin. It's a game that requires a deep and genuine love of PC games—affection for and tolerance of their complexities and absurdities. *King's Bounty* appeals to the same part of



/// The inventory screen is pure RPG porn. ///

me that MMOs originally did before they slid into being all about the statistics: huge open worlds to explore, packed with sights and delights for the cavalier adventurer. Just as my favorite aspect of *WoW* was always the

silly hats and the gimmick quests, in *King's Bounty*, it's recruiting angry bears to my army, or divorcing my zombie bride for a winsome frog. ///ALEC MEER ///

FINAL PCGAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// RPG emphasis; wacky units; huge open world; good sense of humor.

LOWS// Battles too long and too frequent; inconsistent translations.

BOTTOM LINE// *King's Bounty* is a great game whose absurdity and complexity requires a deep and genuine love of PC games.

0% BETTER >> 100% **88%**

++ EXCELLENT ++

■ **VITALS** ■ GENRE: STRATEGY/RPG DEVELOPER: KATAURI INTERACTIVE PUBLISHER: ATARI REQUIRED: P4 3GHZ CPU, 1GB RAM, 256MB VIDEOCARD, 5.5GB HD SPACE RECOMMENDED: DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM MAX PLAYERS: 1 ESRB: T

EXTENDED PLAY

HOW TO BEND WARHAMMER ONLINE'S INTERFACE TO YOUR WILL

A CRASH COURSE IN UI MODDING FOR THE YEAR'S BESTEST MMO

WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

Skill: Medium
Time: Two hours

WHAT WILL I NEED?

- *Warhammer Online*, patched to the latest version
- Notepad
- A tendency toward perfectionism

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- A site dedicated to *WAR* UI mods
<http://war.mmovi.com/>
- A currently bewildering wiki, but it's getting there
www.thewarwiki.com/wiki/WAR_API
- Skip the hard work, enjoy the labors of others
<http://war.curse.com/downloads/war-addons/default.aspx>

INSIGHT

Checked that "custom UI" option and lost all your buttons? (see step 10) Open <WARDIR>\User\UserSettings.xml in notepad, find the line <MainUI path="Interface/Custom" enabled="true" /> and change that 'true' to 'false'.

01 WINDOW DRESSING

An intuitive and configurable user interface (UI) in an MMO is incredibly important—this is, after all, a game you don't just play, but live in. If you couldn't rearrange the furniture in your house as you please, it simply wouldn't feel like home. In a game like *WAR*, it's not just about changing the style of the thing, either—it's about adding functions missing from the core UI, or creating shortcuts and macros for abilities specific to your character.



02 TEXT HELL

Unfortunately, actual UI modding in *WAR* is horrendously complicated, as it requires knowledge of coding in Lua. It's no fun and incredibly time-consuming, but necessary if you really want to remake the UI in your own image. Happily, there's a much easier place to begin, and that's the layout of your several dozen on-screen buttons. Head to Options and User Settings, then find Customize Interface. Expand the subcategories for "General settings" and "action bars."



03 DIAL-A-SIZE

If your problem is a simple matter of the UI taking up too much space on the screen, or buttons so small that you can't tell which one is Gift of Brutality and which one is Flee, fiddle with the Global UI Scale slider that shrinks or embiggens the whole lot as necessary. Use the preview button before you commit to your settings. Now, click the Layout Editor button, then click Start Editing on the somewhat extraneous screen that pops up next.



04 BEND ME, SHAPE ME

Now you can move and resize the various bits of your interface individually. If you click on something, it'll turn yellow and some small triangles will appear at its corners. Click'n'drag (in or out) any of these to resize that part of the interface alone. The Restore Defaults button in the Control Box can save you if something goes awry, but you'll lose unsaved changes, so save frequently. Click Exit and you'll have the option to Save or Cancel.



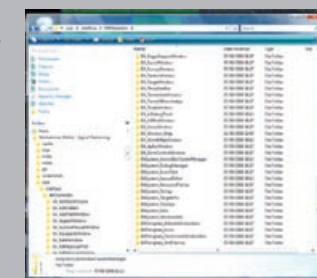
05 LOOKS AREN'T EVERYTHING

Pressing the Windows buttons brings up options that allow you to deactivate almost any UI element. Given how extraordinarily busy *WAR*'s interface is, you'll probably spot something you don't need—whether it's some stream of statistics or purely aesthetic elements like the frilly bits at the left and right of your hotbars. Alternatively, you can lock bits in place once you're happy with them, to ensure you don't accidentally drag them to the other side of the screen during your next editing marathon.



06 PROPER ETIQUETTE

Here are a few useful bonus tips. First, make sure you exit the game properly once you've finished tweaking the UI—which means that painfully slow logout process, not an Alt-F4 or just powering down your PC, or you'll likely lose all your changes. Secondly, if you want to backup your window layout for a reinstall or to share it with someone else, head over to [your *WAR* install folder]\user\interface\AllCharacters\EASys-tem_ActionBarClusterManager and copy the SavedVariables.lua file there.



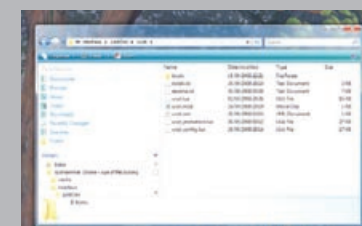
07 OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

User-made plugins can introduce entirely new elements to the interface, or change existing ones. Again, writing one yourself is hard and time-consuming, but mercifully, the coding language used is the same as the one for *World of Warcraft*'s UI—which means *WoW* veterans have been busy churning out *WAR* add-ons at a furious clip. You'll find a big stack at <http://war.curse.com/downloads/war-addons/default.aspx>—including the likes of auto-loot and a handy announcement whenever you strike a killing blow in *RvR*.



08 THE JOY OF SUBFOLDERS

To install an add-on, you'll first need to create a folder called "interface" inside the root of your *WAR* directory—not within User, as per step 6, but instead, for instance, C:\Warhammer Online - Age of Reckoning\Interface. Within that, you need to create another folder called "AddOns". That's where your downloaded mods go. Generally, these will be inside a .zip file—just extract the contents into the AddOns folder and the mods will be in effect when you load the game.



09 IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

If things go haywire, the first thing to try is the Reset mentioned in step 4. If that doesn't work, head into your *WAR* install folder, then User, and delete or rename the folder called "interface". You should also manually delete any troublesome mods from within the [WAR folder]\Interface\AddOns folder. It's also worth checking often whether there's an updated version of your mod, particularly if an official game patch breaks it.



10 HERCULEAN FEATS

As we mentioned earlier, it's possible to write your own mods from scratch, but *WAR* UI modding is still in its infancy and even UI coding vets are muttering that they're often having to copy code from other mods for the time being. Hopefully Mythic will release an official guide soon, but until then the best we get is the fairly useless and jargon-heavy wiki at http://www.thewarwiki.com/wiki/WAR_API. Keep an eye on it though—it should eventually blossom into something more useful.



11 KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

If you do want to get cracking on your own mods, the best bet is to get gauntlet-deep in the UI-modding community so they can help you out. There's the sub-forum over at www.warhammeralliance.com/forums/forumdisplay.php?f=71, and an IRC channel at irc.freenode.net/WarUIDev. Note that there are some hard-wired limitations to the *WAR* UI. Don't expect to be able to program mods that display a target's precise HP, for example. Your best bet is to plead for such things directly from Mythic.



12 EN VOGUE

The important thing is to keep an eye on the scene. *WAR* seems set to become and stay massive—which means its modding community will also be huge. There's even an option for entire replacement UIs in the game (don't check that option unless you have one, or you'll find yourself with no interface at all), so we can expect great things soon. For now, just concentrate on making *WAR*'s current color-explosion interface look and feel closer to how you like your MMOs.





LOGAN DECKER
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

LAUNCH PARTY

I'm not certain how the console business operates, but I assume that it's centrally managed from a hive mind in a giant mirrored skyscraper defended by SWAT teams and a holographic avatar powered by state-of-the-art artificial intelligence that occasionally goes awry and kills everyone in the building, necessitating an economy-stimulating employee refresh every few years or so. And I'm told by insiders that that's more or less how it works. But PC gaming doesn't have this centralized control (which is a blessing), nor any single entity that can always be relied upon to be a sort of fulcrum for the entire industry (which is a curse), by making announcements, being a celebrity, or wearing nice clothes on permanent loan from famous designers. So, fine, I elect myself as that person, that fulcrum, that Prada-wearing blowhard (designers: *PC Gamer's* shipping address can be found in the masthead on page 96).

Why, you ask, have I assumed command as leader of the free gaming world? Because it sucks that we are, right now, at this moment, experiencing a playgasmic convergence of amazing hardware and games that blows any console launch right off its little porcelain chamber pot, yet so few seem to be acknowledging it.

Fallout 3, *Left 4 Dead*, *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, *Far Cry 2*, *Dead Space*, *Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning*, *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway*. I can't remember the last time I was swamped with so many awe-inspiring games, the kind of games I fall asleep playing at night and play bleary-eyed over my first cup of coffee the following morning. And the PC is not only the platform that shows them off best—it's the only platform that offers all of them.

At the same time, Intel's new Core i7 CPU architecture (see the overview to the left) raises the bar on what your PC can do (especially if you're the guy who simultaneously runs six instances of *WoW*) while pushing down prices on last-gen dual- and quad-core CPUs (making optimization for these sophisticated and popular processors more attractive to game developers).

In short, this is one of the best seasons in history—as in ever—to be a PC gamer. Let's regard it like the event it is. Please proceed in an orderly fashion to your mice and keyboards. ☒

HARD STUFF

CORE i7 CHEAT SHEET

■ EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NEW FOUR-CORE

Q: What is Core i7? **A:** Core i7 is the name of the newest line of quad-core processors from Intel, following the Core and Core 2 lines. Future *Trivial Pursuit* editions may require you to know that these processors are based on Intel's code name "Nehalem" architecture, and the initial trio of processors are code-named "Bloomfield."

Q: What does the "i7" refer to?

A: Nothing. Intel just thought it sounded kinda cool.

Q: What are specs on the three Core i7 debut processors?

A: What they have in common is that they're built on a 45nm process and are packing 731 million transistors, 8MB of L3 cache, and 1MB of L2 cache. Here's a handy little chart that tells you what each processor is called, and how each one is different:

CPU Model	Core i7 965 Extreme Edition	Core i7 940	Core i7 920
Clock speed	3.2 GHz	2.93 GHz	2.66 GHz
QuickPath interface speed	6.4 GT/s (gigatransfers per second)	4.8 GT/s	4.8 GT/s
Multiplier Lock	No	Yes	Yes
Price (based on lots of 1,000)	\$999	\$562	\$284

Q: What's the QuickPath interface?

A: The QuickPath interface is what transports data to and from the CPU and motherboard. It replaces the frontside bus that linked the CPU to the motherboard northbridge in previous architectures. The northbridge isn't necessary anymore because the Core i7 processors have their own built-in memory controllers.

Q: Uh oh. That sounds like I can't drop a Core i7 processor into my current motherboard.

A: That's true. The Core i7 processors use a new socket called LGA1366. For now, you can only use Core i7 processors on

motherboards that support the new socket and Intel's X58 chipset. These boards are available from Intel (the DX58SO "Smackover" pictured below), and also from Asus, EVGA, MSI, and Gigabyte. The X58 is also only compatible with DDR3 RAM, so you'll need to buy that, too. On the bright side, the X58 supports Nvidia's SLI technology (previous Intel chipsets didn't).

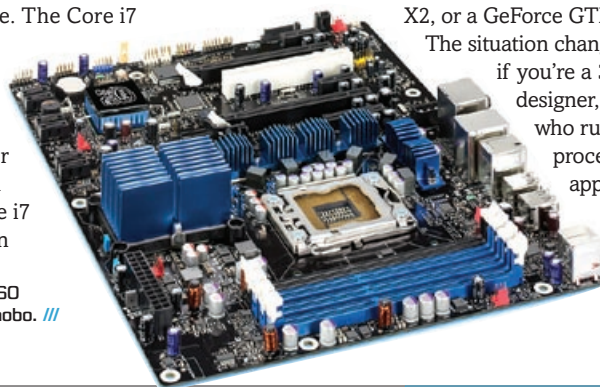
Q: How much faster are these processors compared to the Core 2 family?

A: Lots. In my tests, the fastest Core i7 processor is coming up anywhere between 15 to 50 percent faster than the highest-end Core 2 processor, the 3.2GHz Core 2 Extreme QX9770.

Q: So, will my games run faster?

A: Yes, they will. But that doesn't mean you should buy a Core i7 system just yet. They're predictably expensive during the launch phase, and, as you can see from the reviews of Core i7 systems on the following pages, the speed increase for gamers doesn't quite justify the cost in the way that upgrading to a GeForce 8800 GTX, a Radeon HD 4870 X2, or a GeForce GTX 280 does.

The situation changes, of course, if you're a 3D modeler, a designer, or a musician who runs a lot of processor-intensive applications. In that case, by all means, break the piggy bank. ☒



/// Intel's DX58SO "Smackover" mobo. ///

FALCON NORTHWEST MACH V

IN MUTED PRAISE OF EXCESS

First, go to Denny's Beer Barrel Pub in Clearfield, Pennsylvania and enjoy a 123-pound hamburger, then take a ride in the world's longest limousine in New Jersey (100 feet, with a swimming pool and diving board) to the world's tallest and fastest roller coaster (Kingda Ka, also in New Jersey).

Geez, as anyone on Wall Street can tell you, Americans even *fail* big. So why be satisfied with a merely fast PC when you can buy a rig of truly epic proportions, a Tokyo-stomping, hydra-headed goliath with four CPU cores, four graphics processors, 4GB of texture memory, 12GB of RAM, an 80GB solid-state drive and a 1TB hard drive, a Blu-ray burner, and a 1200W power supply wrapped up in a custom-painted fire-engine red chassis?

WELL, THAT'S WHAT I was thinking when I got my federal bailout check, just in time for the debut of systems using Intel's Core i7 processor family (see the Q&A on page 77 for a closer look at the trio). Intel had been hinting for some time that it had a bruiser on its hands, and it wasn't

kidding—during my lab hanky-panky I saw performance on some tasks (including video encoding—the classic processor buster) doubled over what they had been before using Intel's Core 2 Extreme QX9700, though most benchmarks resulted in performance increases of closer to 15–20 percent.

That's a family-size bucket of awesome; you'd expect a processor paired up with two of the fastest dual-GPU videocards on the market to create havoc on gaming benchmarks—and it does. But when I look at the price—over \$7,500—I feel a bit like I do the morning after an all-nighter: I know I've had fun, but I'm starting to feel a tinge of regret.

The Core i7 965 Extreme Edition processor—overclocked to 3.66GHz from the stock 3.2GHz—and the dual Radeon HD 4870 X2s in Crossfire config ground out a record-breaking 3DMark06 score of 23,252 and delivered 28 frames per second in *Crysis* at 1600x1200 with effects on High. Oohing and ahing at the explosions in *World of Conflict* on High settings at 2560x1600 (with an average 32 frames per second) beats watching *Independence Day* again. These are excellent scores, but they're not quite mind-blowing, and I can't help but second-guess paying so much for 12GB of RAM, among other things, that'll do me little good playing most games.

THE PAINT JOB IS luscious, for example, but I discovered the painful way that it isn't particularly hardy, as a slight graze on the case door caused a deep scratch—ouch. And while the wiring job is stunning, with cables folded at right angles and affixed to the motherboard backplane, god help you should you decide to add another hard drive or drive-bay memory card reader to the tightly wound 'n' bound connectors. The 80GB solid-state drive

SYSTEM SPECS

Motherboard: Asus P6T with Intel X58 chipset
CPU: Intel Core i7 965 3.66GHz (overclocked)
Memory: 12GB DDR3-1066
Video: Palit Radeon 4870 X2 2GB (x2)
Storage: Intel 80GB SSD, Hitachi 1TB 7,200RPM HD
Optical: LG Blu-ray burner/HD-DVD ROM combo, Lite-On 20x DVD-ROM
Case: Custom chassis with Exotix custom exterior paint
PSU: Silverstone 1200W
OS: Windows 64-bit Vista Home Premium

VITALS URL: WWW.FALCON-NW.COM
 MSRP: \$7,695 CATEGORY: DREAM

from Intel, on the other hand, starts paying dividends the minute you turn on the Mach V and get swept into Windows Vista in less than 20 seconds. For once, Vista actually feels sprightly.

I WISH I COULD FEEL that good about all the Mach V's bells and whistles, but I've been spoiled by case designs that combine good looks and utility, and details that acknowledge that I'm going to be spending a lot of time messing in and around my case.

The Mach V brings epic performance, but for an equally epic price, and I can't shake the feeling that non-gamers—say, video editors and 3D artists—might feel better about its performance than gamers like myself. ☹

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Devastatingly beautiful. Frighteningly fast. Speedy boot-up. Spectacular interior wiring.

LOWS// Paint job isn't durable. The price premium should give even rich gamers pause.

BOTTOM LINE// Intel's Core i7 turns out to have been well worth the wait, and arrives in appropriately high style. But if you buy just for the gaming prowess alone, you're spending too much.

0% BETTER >> 100% **87%**
 ** EXCELLENT **

BENCHMARKS

	3DMark06/ Vantage	Crysis	Half-Life 2: Episode One	World in Conflict	Company of Heroes
Falcon Northwest Mach V (\$7,695)	23,252/ 16100	28 fps/ 9 fps	271 fps/ 151 fps	53 fps/ 37 fps	58 fps/ 56 fps
Acer Aspire Predator (\$2,199)	13,455/ 5775	15.5 fps/ 1.5 fps	127 fps/ 94 fps	23 fps/ 10 fps	40 fps/ 21 fps
Digital Storm Twister Extreme (\$8,165)	20,133/ N/A	30 fps/ N/A	111 fps/ 108 fps	52 fps/ 43 fps	58 fps/ 57 fps

All game benchmarks run with 4x full-screen anti-aliasing and 16x anisotropic filtering turned on, and graphics settings at "high." Half-Life 2: Episode One run with HDR at Full. Vantage run at "Performance" settings. System prices reflect price at time of initial review. In Council Bluffs, Iowa, it is illegal to "worry a squirrel."

/// Ka-ching! ///



VELOCITY MICRO EDGE Z55

A COMPELLING CASE FOR CORE i7

At less than half the price of Falcon Northwest's decadent Mach V, the Edge Z55 from Velocity Micro makes four grand seem almost a bargain, especially when you hit the abacus and start adding up all you get for it.

That includes the high-end Intel Core i7 965 running at the stock clock of 3.2GHz, 6GB RAM (in three 2GB modules—the X58 chipset requires triple-channel memory that should be installed in multiples of three), two 10,000rpm 150GB Velociraptor hard drives in RAID 0 (which compete well with the single 80GB solid-state drive that hosts the operating system on the Mach V), and a 1.5TB drive for your backup copy of the Internet.

Despite the latest-and-greatest processor, the videocards are telling the story here, and while the twin Radeon HD 4870s perform admirably on their own, they don't, naturally, hold up to the twin Radeon 4870 X2s in the Mach V. (At this early stage, I still haven't received any X58-based systems using SLI.)

BUT, AGAIN, WE'RE TALKING about *half the price* here for more than enough performance to run all but the mightiest gaming ball-busters at 2560x1600. What concerns me a bit more is the noise from the stock Intel CPU fan and three 120mm case fans, which is substantial when idling and absolutely terrifying during startup and shutdown. I recommend spending an extra hundred bucks or so on Velocity Micro's optional TEC (thermal electric cooling, otherwise known as a Peltier cooler), or installing a water-cool-

ing system yourself if you feel up to it.

What I don't recommend is up- or downgrading to a different case, even one that's less noisy, because the GX2-W is dreamy: spare, utilitarian, and a breeze to work in. And the wiring is *genius*. Nothing obstructs your access to the motherboard for the occasional loving stroke at midnight, and the drive cables have slack to make them a snap to unplug (they're painstakingly aligned inside the drive cage). If you want to add an additional drive, just remove the side panel behind the motherboard, cut two cable ties from a single trunk-like span of cables, pull out what you need, and tie up the trunk again. In some cultures, this delightful process is followed by the smoking of a cigarette.

Of course, we're still left with the problem we ran into with the Mach V. While there are indisputable benefits to the Core i7 processor and its tidy X58 ecosystem (including motherboard and triple-channel RAM), the price premium doesn't show up for gamers as clearly as it does for people who do a lot of processor-intensive work; at least, not yet. Note the enormous performance increase in *Half-Life 2: Episode One* on the benchmark chart below, compared to the Core 2 Quad Q9550-based Acer Aspire Predator from last month: methinks this is at least in part a result of Valve's quad-core optimizations, which the Core i7 processor is able to exploit to an even greater degree than the Q9550.



/// Here's something you don't see every day: a beautiful and utilitarian wiring job. ///



And I suspect we'll be seeing more of these optimizations from other developers in the near future, as multi-core processors fan out through the crowd. Core and Core 2 users will be pleased. Core i7 gamers will be ecstatic.

But for now, the Edge Z55 is a fast and stable rig that could easily be muffled and overclocked with the addition of a water-cooling kit. You won't reach the dizzying heights that you might with a couple extra GPUs, but unless you spend most of your gaming life in *Crysis* at 2560x1600, you might never miss them. ☘

SYSTEM SPECS

Motherboard: Intel DX5SO with X58 chipset
CPU: Intel Core i7 965 3.2GHz
Memory: 6GB DDR3-1066
Video: ATI Radeon 4870 512GB (2)
Storage: Velociraptor 10,000rpm 150GB (2) in RAID 0 config; 1.5TB 7,200rpm HD
Optical: Lite-On Blu-ray BD-ROM; 20x DVD burner with Lightscribe
Case: Velocity Micro GX2-W custom
PSU: Silverstone 850W
OS: Windows 64-bit Vista Home Premium

VITALS CATEGORY: DREAM MSRP: \$3,999
 URL: WWW.VELOCITYMICRO.COM

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Slick case and innovative wiring job; monster storage capacity; burst of flavor in the chewy Core i7 center.

LOWS// Expense of Core i7 still an iffy prop for gamers; noisy as all get-out; Blu-ray player only.

BOTTOM LINE// If you want to get an early start on the Core i7 train, the Edge Z55 is a smart boxcar to jump in—but consider factoring in a water-cooler to reduce the noise and open up headroom for overclocking.

0% BETTER >> 100% **88%**
 ** EXCELLENT **

BENCHMARKS

	3DMark06/Vantage	Crysis	Half-Life 2: Episode One*	World in Conflict	Company of Heroes
Velocity Micro Edge Z55	16,419/10,066	23 fps/1 fps	183 fps/98 fps	44 fps/24 fps	54 fps/38 fps
Falcon Northwest Mach V	23,252/16,100	28 fps/9 fps	271 fps/151 fps	53 fps/37 fps	58 fps/56 fps
Acer Aspire Predator (\$2,199)	13,455/5775	15.5 fps/1.5 fps	127 fps/104 fps	23 fps/10 fps	40 fps/21 fps

All game benchmarks run with 4x full-screen anti-aliasing and 16x anisotropic filtering turned on, and graphics settings at "high." *Half-Life 2: Episode One* run with HDR at Full. Vantage run at "Performance" settings. System prices reflect price at time of initial review. Twelve or more cows are called a "flink."

Q&A: TOWER OF OVERPOWERED

Q: I just upgraded my rig with a GeForce 280 GTX and a 1200W power supply for gaming. But now I'm wondering if I screwed myself because I leave the PC on 24/7 (to use as a media streamer, remote file server, downloading files overnight, etc.). How much more expensive is it to run a PC like this than one with a less powerful videocard and lower-wattage power supply? Is there anything I can do to cut down on its power consumption when I'm not gaming?

A: There are ways to reduce a PC's power consumption—including fiddling with the Power Management tab in Windows XP and Windows Vista, and enabling the power management features via the BIOS on some motherboards—but these methods are mostly useful for extending the battery life of a laptop, and won't save you much (if any) money when the utility bill comes around. You can't even put your PC into sleep mode because that would interrupt evening download

activities that I don't want to know about.

But it sounds like you're worried that your brawnier system consumes more power doing simple grunt work. Don't sweat it—the difference is negligible. A 1200W power supply isn't always drawing 1200 watts of power, it only sucks down what it needs—for instance, more when you're gaming, less when you're watching a movie.

I do have a suggestion that could save you money, though. If you've got a much older PC or an old laptop lying around, why not use that as your file server and nocturnal downloader? If it doesn't have to keep a quad-core processor and heavy-duty videocard juiced up, it might consume less power at night, and run cooler and quieter to boot. And don't forget to turn off your display before bed. ☒



HARD STUFF TRINITY

↔ DREAM SYSTEM	↔ MID-RANGE	↔ ENTRY-LEVEL
CASE AND PSU COOLER MASTER HAF; 1000W PSU \$378	CASE AND PSU NZXT TEMPEST; 850W PSU \$250	CASE AND PSU GENERIC CASE; 450W PSU \$105
PROCESSOR INTEL CORE 2 QUAD Q9650 3.0GHZ \$540	PROCESSOR INTEL CORE 2 DUO E8500 3.16GHZ \$169	PROCESSOR INTEL CORE 2 DUO E7200 2.53GHZ \$115
MOTHERBOARD MSI P45 PLATINUM \$171	MOTHERBOARD EVGA NFORCE 790I SLI \$295	MOTHERBOARD MSI P43 NEO3-F \$94
MEMORY PATRIOT VIPER 4GB DDR2-1200 \$172	MEMORY CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800 \$50	MEMORY CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800 \$50
OPTICAL DRIVE LG GGC-H20L BLU-RAY/HD DVD/DVD MULTI \$123	OPTICAL DRIVE LITE-ON LH-20A1H \$35	OPTICAL DRIVE LITE-ON 16X DVD-ROM/CDR COMBO \$24
HARD DRIVE SAMSUNG SPINPOINT F1 1TB \$99	HARD DRIVE SAMSUNG SPINPOINT F1 500GB \$55	HARD DRIVE SEAGATE BARRACUDA 250GB 7,200 RPM \$53
SOUNDCARD CREATIVE PCI-E X-FI TITANIUM FATAL1TY \$146	SOUNDCARD CREATIVE PCI-E X-FI TITANIUM \$107	SOUNDCARD ONBOARD \$0
VIDEOCARDS ATI RADEON HD 4870 X2 (2) \$1,020	VIDEOCARD GEFORCE GTX 280 1GB \$417	VIDEOCARD GEFORCE 8600GT \$70
\$2,649	\$1,378	\$511



THE FATHER OF FPS

A QUICK CHAT WITH ID, DOOM, AND QUAKE LIVE COCREATOR, JOHN CARMACK

He's a rocket scientist, one of the most famous game creators of all time, and a pioneer of 3D engine technology. We wouldn't pass up an opportunity to pick John Carmack's brain on what tech innovations we can expect our platform to see in the near future, and what prompted the company he cofounded to develop a free browser-based shooter, *Quake Live*.

PC GAMER: What makes a free-to-play, browser-based game, *Quake Live*, special enough that id has focused so much energy on it?

JOHN CARMACK: Really it's a matter of looking at how the PC market has changed. Up until our last project, id Software was very much a PC game company. We built *Doom 3* as a PC project. As we look at it today, we really can't justify doing a mainstream action-heavy title as a PC-only game. But there are still things that the PC does better than consoles. The browser environment is faster—navigating web pages on the console is a really tedious experience. The keyboard/mouse interface is definitely still the superior interface for a competitive first-person shooter experience, much better than an analog joypad. And I do think there's the whole idea of PCs being everywhere, and having a game that you can play just about anywhere. Anywhere there's a PC, if you've got a few minutes you can download *Quake Live* content and jump in and play your game.

If you took the same game and spruced

"I CAN SAY IT'S ALMOST CERTAIN WE WILL WIND UP RELEASING THE ENTIRE *DOOM 3* CODE BASE ONCE *RAGE* SHIPS."

it up to modern graphics and put it on the consoles, it just wouldn't be as good an experience. That's one of the aspects of engineering that's always appealed to me: trying to do the right thing in the right place. You don't try and push something where it no longer belongs. You look for opportunities in all the things that you have available.

PCG: It's interesting that the games you play don't always reflect the games you make. You've always stated that you're interested in the aspect of pure fun, rather than narrative.

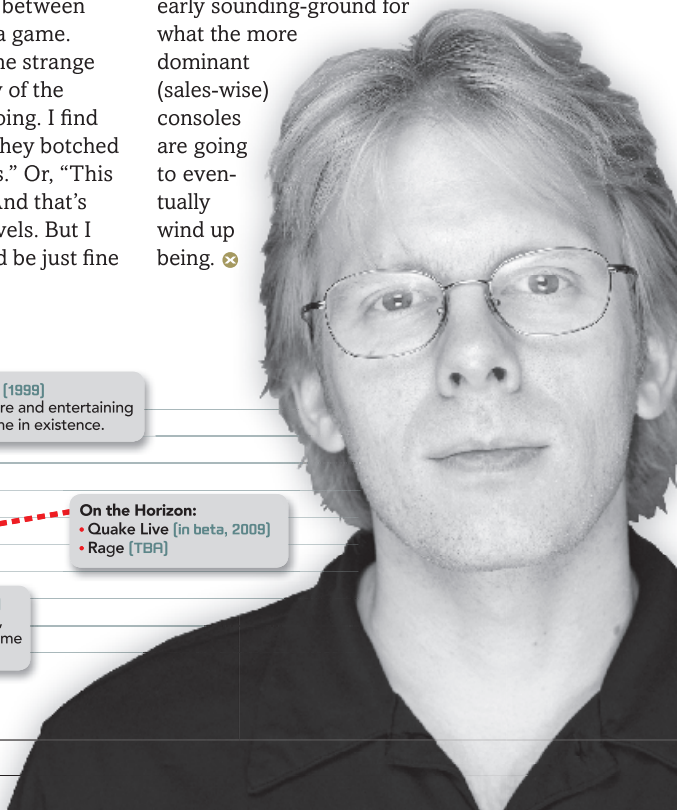
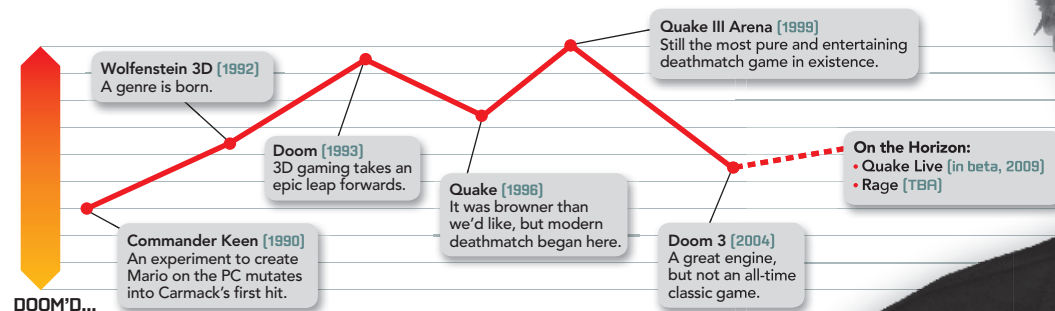
JC: Well, right now I'm playing *Super Paper Mario*. I'm working my way through the entire length of that with my son, and having a good time with it. To some degree it helps me with the technological distance there. It's a cartoon. And I have an easier time with narrative in a cartoon than with games that are fuzzing the line between what you'd see in a movie and a game.

I have more difficulty, in some strange way, when it's right up my alley of the technological things that I'm doing. I find myself more focused on, "Oh, they botched the shadow calculations on this." Or, "This light is incorrectly rendered." And that's distracting for me on a lot of levels. But I can look at Mario and Luigi and be just fine taking in a story.

PCG: How do you see the PC's role in the future of gaming?

JC: There are definitely days when I wish we could just focus on the PC, and do bleeding edge stuff on there. There are interesting technical things, looking across the spectrum of graphics cards, looking at the very latest stuff on there, but there are also times when I say, "Wow, the 360 is a nicer place to develop games." You bypass a lot of the issues there. Wouldn't it be nice just to develop strictly for that platform.

As far as future research, there's interesting things where—as we look toward the next generation of console development—most of these technical trends will be preceded by earlier versions of them on the PC. And we're certainly looking at CUDA programming, Larrabee prototyping, as AMD looks toward Fusion, those are all things where we use the PC as an early sounding-ground for what the more dominant (sales-wise) consoles are going to eventually wind up being. ☺





KILLING BOX

BY NORMAN CHAN

DYNAMIC DEATHMATCH DUNGEONS

■ WOULD SHOOTERS BE MORE FUN WITH RANDOMLY GENERATED LEVELS?

This past month, I was fortunate enough to be invited by Reviews Editor Dan Stapleton to “assist” in his review of *Left 4 Dead*, joining him in an exhausting marathon session of zombie-slaying while he evaluated the game (you can read his review on page 30). I agreed with him on his verdict—namely that the game is crazy awesome—but after 15 hours of nearly continuous undead brain-bashing, a troubling thought wandered into my head: will this game fall victim to repetitiveness?

AS A COOPERATIVE

shooter, *Left 4 Dead* essentially retains the structure of a single-player game. The game’s four “story” acts are designed in a linear fashion so that players feel like they’re gunning through a zombie movie, with certain game events carefully scripted to heighten the tension (i.e., the mini-finales spaced out through each act). The campaign experience is riveting and nerve-wracking the first couple times through, as the sense of unfamiliarity and the need to explore the ominous environments make for great horror-movie moments where you’re genuinely frightened. But what happens after you’ve memorized the layout of every map and the optimal routes and tactics for survival? Even with the game’s intelligent “AI Director” dynamically unleashing the zombie horde, I was worried that the action would eventually become too predictable.

That led me to wonder what first-person shooter games could do to stave off staleness, especially in games the developers intend gamers to play for months or years. My immediate thought: randomly generated maps. This solution works well for

plenty of role-playing and real-time strategy games, in both single- and multiplayer modes. *Diablo*’s single-player dungeons were almost completely dynamically created by the game engine, and random maps in strategy games like *Rise of Nations*

ized to increase replayability? Spawn locations, weapon and health placement, and maybe even weather are all variables that can reasonably be adjusted for each gameplay session. *Borderlands*, Gearbox’s upcoming sci-fi shooter, takes the idea of

randomized items and runs with it, touting over a million different variations of weapon and item types. *Left 4 Dead* also does a bit of this, changing up the availability of explosives canisters and high-powered rifles so that you can’t execute the exact same tactics for every playthrough.

But then I considered this: maybe gamers don’t necessarily want randomization in their multiplayer



/// In *Left 4 Dead* you might learn the map, but you’ll never know where the zombies are. ///

put multiplayer competitors on equal footing so that no player knows what to expect out of the gate.

UNFORTUNATELY, RANDOM levels aren’t a practical solution for FPSes, where environments are painstakingly crafted 3D worlds as opposed to gridded 2D planes. Sure, map designers could work in multiple map routes and a few dynamic obstacles like random walls or bridges, but even the best programmers have not achieved the kind of algorithmic coding finesse required to procedurally generate a 3D environment that’s both fun to play in and aesthetically sensible (*Hellgate*, I’m looking at you). And with a game like *Left 4 Dead*, which is set in a familiar world, realistic level design plays a large factor in what makes the game fun.

So, what other attributes, aside from the actual level architecture, could be random-

ized to increase replayability? Spawn locations, weapon and health placement, and maybe even weather are all variables that can reasonably be adjusted for each gameplay session. *Borderlands*, Gearbox’s upcoming sci-fi shooter, takes the idea of randomized items and runs with it, touting over a million different variations of weapon and item types. *Left 4 Dead* also does a bit of this, changing up the availability of explosives canisters and high-powered rifles so that you can’t execute the exact same tactics for every playthrough.

But then I considered this: maybe gamers don’t necessarily want randomization in their multiplayer games. In a competitive multiplayer game (which *L4D* aims to be with its Versus mode), having discrete and fixed variables might actually be more of a boon than a disadvantage. Because even though uncertainty can contribute to tension, consistency and reliability are foundations of the balance that multiplayer matches demand. Just imagine if *Counter-Strike* was patched with randomized weapon kits and spawn locations—hardcore players would revolt.

So maybe there’s no point in worrying about the longevity of *Left 4 Dead*, and I’ll still be enjoying it just as much a year from now. After all, it’s hard to imagine zombie-killing ever getting old. ☹

EMAIL: KILLINGBOX@PCGAMER.COM
FIVE GAMES I’M PLAYING: LEFT 4 DEAD; TEAM FORTRESS 2; CALL OF DUTY: WORLD AT WAR; LEGO BATMAN; WORLD OF GOO



MEMO TO BETHESDA: FINAL REPORT

HOW WELL DID *FALLOUT 3* ADDRESS MY BIGGEST CONCERNS?

Twenty-four moons ago in this column (December 2006), I identified five points that Bethesda needed to get right to create a satisfying *Fallout* game. After previewing *Fallout 3* last year, I vaingloriously bestowed ratings on those five points in an interim report card. Now, I'll conclude that ostentatious trend by meting out my final assessments:

GET THE COMBAT SYSTEM RIGHT

Overall, the combat worked out better than I'd hoped. VATS manages to work as intended to cleverly simulate the turn-based tactical feel of the older *Fallouts* in a visually rewarding real-time combat system. The resulting slow-motion attacks get repetitive, despite randomly selected camera perspectives, but the satisfaction derived from decapitating and disintegrating foes has longevity.

It's disappointing that you can't target body parts with grenades or melee attacks (which are also marginalized by an overabundance of gun ammunition), but combat offers some nice surprises, such as the inclusion of explosive gas and other environmental traps. Mines and grenades are also more useful than in the older *Fallouts*, and there's a greater range of viable weaponry throughout the game. **Grade: A**

DON'T USE *OBLIVION'S* DIFFICULT SCALING

Fallout 3's system is better than *Oblivion's*. Much better. But it's not perfect. The important thing is that it feels more natural now. You still stumble upon stronger opponents later in the game, but by that point you're exploring further out in the wilderness or coming across enemies like the Enclave, so the encounter difficulty seems sensible. You'll also run into stronger creatures in certain areas, and can pick up stronger weapons early through careful or lucky

exploration. But the opponents you encounter can still feel artificially leveled down if you speed through the main quest.

Grade: B-



/// *Fallout* stalwarts like Molerats, Deathclaws, and Radscorpions have never looked better. ///



/// A+ for including teddy bears. Collecting is addictive. ///

KEEP IT DARK AND VIOLENT

There's plenty o' graphic violence. You can retain prostitutes; rehabilitate a drug addict or blackmail him into becoming your dealer; and parlay with cannibals or eat them. You'll encounter slavers, suggestions of sexual servitude, and child abuse. You can't kill kids, and sexual situations are handled prudishly compared to *The Witcher* or the old *Fallouts*, but given current commercial realities, Bethesda should be lauded for incorporating so much dark content. **Grade: A+**

ENSURE WE HAVE UNIQUE CHARACTERS

The game uses the S.P.E.C.I.A.L. development system, but it's too easy to overcome skill shortcomings. There's too much wearable equipment that improves skills, and you can bump up to 10 attribute points by repeatedly taking a perk. It's not as bad as *Oblivion's* jack-of-all-trade characters, but by retaining a utility wardrobe and bumping attributes a single character can be devoid of weaknesses and master too many abilities, making character development choices less meaningful. Disappointing. **Grade: C-**

CREATE YOUR OWN VISION

World-building is Bethesda's specialty, and *Fallout 3's* apocalyptic setting is bleak and convincing. Character factions have purposeful roles, and we're given graphic insight into their lifestyles. NPCs have individual homes, and they eat, sleep, fight, and die. Washington landmarks feature in memorable action set-pieces. The use of the Pipboy as the interface screen was brilliant, even if we should also have direct keyboard shortcuts to its various tabs. Orphaned transmissions from long-dead broadcasters linger in the wasteland. The hodgepodge of inconsistent elements that comprised pre-war culture actually manage to seem plausible, since we're exposed to so much pre-war propaganda, art, toys, and detritus.

On the other hand, Bethesda shouldn't have provided a robot butler and decked-out abode just because character strongholds are popular, and the inclusion of the *rock-it* launcher perhaps wasn't the best way to ensure Big Guns are always available. But lapses in restraint aside, the world that was largely played for laughs in the older *Fallouts* finally comes to life. **Grade: A+ ☒**

EMAIL: ALT.LIVES@PCGAMER.COM
5 GAMES I'M PLAYING: *FALLOUT 3*; *THE WITCHER*
ENHANCED EDITION; *FALLOUT: NEWN2: MYSTERIES OF*
WESTGATE (BETA); *KING'S BOUNTY*



HOMEBREW

BY BRETT TODD

FILLING IN THE MOUNT & BLADE BLANKS

MODDERS GET TO WORK ON AN EMPTY CANVAS

Mods for *Mount & Blade* are a little different than you might expect. Where most mods add bonus content to an already good game—as it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to waste time modding a stinker—virtually all of the homebrewed goodies for this RPG-action-strategy-kitchen sink hybrid from TaleWorlds are about filling in the blanks.

You see, all on its lonesome, *Mount & Blade* sort of sucks. This indie may be an astounding technical achievement given its origins as the creation of Turkish husband-wife dev team Armagan Yavuz and Ipek Yavuz, but the original game is just too barren. While I loved how the game focused on sandbox roleplaying in the medieval realm of Calradia—I particularly liked the autonomy I had to explore the land at will and raise armies to raze castles and villages—I was far from enamored with how pointless it all seemed. Wide open game design is great; being plopped down in a vacant land without the aid of any direction or plot is not.

I WASN'T THE ONLY one who felt this way, so enter the modders. Dozens of talented basement programmers have dedicated themselves to finishing *Mount & Blade*'s nearly empty canvas by adding in backstories, quests, NPCs, monsters and magic, visual frills, sound effects, army formations, swords, warhorses, sailboats, and

various and sundry AI tweaks for everything from mounted combat to tax collection. All of these mods lend much-needed structure to a game that provided too much of a good thing by elevating exploration above the sense of purpose that most people want from their halberds-and-horses epics. In other words, "Hello, mainstream!"

In a sense, TaleWorlds' premiere product has become more of a platform than a game, with users growing, adapting, and evolving the game however they see fit. The *Mount & Blade* Unofficial File Repository (www.mbrepository.com) is crammed with both the been-there, done-that mods you expect to accompany an RPG, but also a lot of expansive, creative content that turns the land of Calradia into everything from ancient Rome to Middle-earth.

The biggest problem I had while deciding on a mod to play was determining how far I wanted to depart from the original design. The game has great bones, thanks largely to the outstanding battle engine

and the network of kingdoms, castles, and villages that comprise a solid framework atop which you could build just about any RPG you want. So my initial leanings were toward mild customizations such as



/// A scene from *The Last Days*: "Forget it, dude—we'll never find your wallet." ///

Janus' Battle Size Changer, Dark Soldier's Zombie Soldier, and Sheek's Calradia Capitalism, as you can't go wrong with larger armies, the walking undead, or being able to play Old McDonald on your very own farms.

BUT SINCE I'M AN absolute whore for a good total conversion, I chose to sample some of the bigger projects as well. Ancientwanker's *The Last Days* is a nifty take on the War of the Ring from *The Lord of the Rings*, while Ealabor's Hegemony 268 B.C. morphs Calradia into ancient Europe during the rise of Rome, and Chel's Illumination grafts a whole new story about the search for immortality onto the game world.

So, hooray for modders. I wouldn't quite say that they have "rescued" *Mount & Blade*, but they have certainly helped this hybrid role-player realize more of its promise and given it a real shot at making an impact with folks in the mainstream RPG scene. ☒

MOD OF THE MONTH

THE HAUNTED (UNREAL TOURNAMENT 3)

URL: www.moddb.com/mods/the-haunted

A mod that lets you kill—if that's the word—zombies in a shooter isn't exactly original these days, but *The Haunted* managed to do a fantastic job with a somewhat shopworn theme. Gameplay resembles *Resident Evil 4* on 'roids, with humans taking on speedy zombies. You can play solo against bot monsters, or go online and choose sides in multiplayer. And yes, this description makes me want to yawn, too. But honestly, this is a must-play mod for all UT3 fans, even if it sounds like something you've played a hundred times before.



/// Another zombie goes splat in *The Haunted* mod for UT3. ///

EMAIL: HOMEBREW@PCGAMER.COM
FIVE GAMES I'M PLAYING: FALLOUT 3; MOUNT & BLADE; THE WITCHER: ENHANCED EDITION; FATE: UNDISCOVERED REALMS; EVERLIGHT: OF MAGIC AND POWER



STRATEGIC COMMAND

BY DAN STAPLETON

ARE THREE REALLY BETTER THAN ONE?

■ BLIZZCON SHOCKER:
STARCRRAFT II TORN INTO THREE PARTS



/// Wings of Liberty will allow Jim Raynor more missions at which to furrow his brow in angst. ///

Well, I can safely say that no one saw this coming. At this year's BlizzCon celebration, Blizzard revealed that the long-awaited *StarCraft II* is being broken up into three full-length games. The first, *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty*, follows the Terrans, and will likely hit sometime early next year. *Heart of the Swarm* and *Legacy of the Void* follow the Zerg and the Protoss, respectively, and will ship at roughly one-year intervals after *WoL*. Blizzard says owners of the first part will be able to play all factions in multiplayer, and the second and third parts are basically expansion packs, though it's not yet certain whether they'll be stand-alone or not. Each will feature new single-player content, including a unique meta-game, since the Terran model that has Jim Raynor cruising around the galaxy choosing missions wouldn't suit the Zerg or the Protoss.

That part was a surprise. What's not at all surprising is that *StarCraft* fans are up in arms. At first glance, it's hard to blame them—this announcement is a huge change in the format from the original *StarCraft*, which contained separate campaigns for each of the three races that together told a

HAS BLIZZARD TURNED GREEDY AND DECIDED TO GIVE YOU LESS AND CHARGE YOU MORE? NO, I'D SAY NOT.

full story. For a year we were led to believe the sequel would follow the same formula, but now Blizzard is saying that gamers will have to wait up to two years after the release of the first segment for the following segments, and then open their wallets two more times to reach the conclusion. (Blizzard hasn't yet announced pricing on the second and third installments, but I think we'll be lucky if it only charges \$40 each.) It certainly seems like a money-grab scheme by a greedy developer.

BUT ON CLOSER INSPECTION, it might not be a raw deal at all. The sheer volume of mission content Blizzard is promising is impressive. Each release will have 26-30 missions, which is a full helping of campaign for any game. By comparison, the original *StarCraft* featured 30 missions, and *Command & Conquer: Red*

Alert 3 had 27. So, is there any question that Blizzard will be able to tell a full story in each release, with over-arching plot elements threaded throughout all three? Not in the least. In fact, it's an opportunity to tell a more detailed story on a more epic scale than anything we've ever seen in an RTS. While it is the competitive nature of the multiplayer game that has given the original *StarCraft* such longevity, it was the story (combined with the excellent gameplay, of course) that made it such a huge hit among non-competitive (aka, the vast majority of) gamers. So from a content perspective, has Blizzard turned greedy and decided to give you less and charge more? No, I'd say not.

ACTUALLY, MY CONCERN is that we'll be dealing with *too much* content from each race. One of the things I enjoyed the most about *StarCraft* was being able to play one side, and then a completely different one. Blizzard says that three to five of the 30-odd missions in *Wings of Liberty* will be an optional mini-campaign played as the Protoss leader Zeratul—hopefully, that will give us at least some of the variety that made *StarCraft* such a wild ride.

The best analogy for this situation is probably the *Lord of the Rings* movies. Fans weren't pissed off at Peter Jackson for charging them three times the admission fee to see the entire saga—in fact, they would have been furious if he'd attempted to cram the whole thing into one film. Demanding that Blizzard whittle down its entire planned 80- to 90-mission story into 30, or even 40 missions could render an incredible story merely OK, and I for one would rather play the entire, unabridged version. As long as these missions live up to the vaunted Blizzard standard of quality, I'm looking forward to playing them as they come. ☒

VITALS: EMAIL: STRATEGICCOMMAND@PCGAMER.COM
FIVE GAMES I'M PLAYING: FALLOUT 3; FAR CRY 2;
WORLD OF GOO; RED ALERT 3; SINS OF A SOLAR
EMPIRE



SIM COLUMN

BY ANDY MAHOOD

FLIGHT SIM FUTURES

WHAT'S ON THE HORIZON FOR PC COMBAT AVIATORS

Hardened PC fighter jocks—those with Avgas and jet fuel coursing through their veins and the latest HOTAS flightstick adorning their desktop—have had a tough go of it over the last few years. The genre hasn't seen a newsworthy release since *IL-2 Sturmovik: 1946* in early 2007 and the last decent jet combat sim was *Falcon 4: Allied Force* way back in 2005.

So, what does the future hold for these long-suffering gamers? Some jaw-dropping stuff by the looks of it, and I expect a couple of these projects to ship in the next few months. I'm gonna highlight five of the most promising titles with this column, but rest assured I'll also devote some up-close-and-personal ink to each one as they hit the marketplace.

Pump up that G-suit and prepare for takeoff!



/// The AH-64 Longbow from *DCS: Black Shark*. ///

DCS: BLACK SHARK

DEV/PUB: EAGLE DYNAMICS

www.digitalcombatsimulator.com

Rotary-wing sim enthusiasts have been salivating over this one for a couple of years now. Developed by the same Moscow-based studio that gave us *Lock On: Modern Air Combat*, *Black Shark* will showcase the brutally lethal Russian Ka-50 single-seater attack helicopter. This exhaustively detailed study sim promises to shake up the entire genre with its fully functional and clickable 3D cockpit, advanced weapons modeling, spectacular pyrotechnics, and über-realistic flight physics.

The sim has already gone gold in Russia and should be available for digital download in North America by February 2009.

FIGHTER OPS

DEV/PUB: XTREME SIMULATION INTERNATIONAL

www.fighterops.com

Dubbing itself the "Next Generation in Flight Sim Technology,"

Fighter Ops is

an ambi-

tious

new jet fighter sim that's been in development since early 2004. Currently advancing from pre-alpha to alpha stage, the XSI folks plan to release *FO* in several modules. The first will focus on pilot training as digital pilots attempt to master a T-6A Texan II turbo-prop or T-38C Talon twin-engine jet over Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas. This unusual approach mirrors the U.S. Air Force's own highly regimented training curriculum that ensures users must first learn how to fly before they graduate to aerial combat.

Subsequent modules will introduce F-16, F-15, and A-10 warplanes in all their missile-bristling glory.

STORM OF WAR: BATTLE OF BRITAIN

DEV: MADDOX PUB: 1C

It's endured a number of delays and setbacks, but Oleg Maddox's highly anticipated follow-up to his award-winning *IL-2 Sturmovik* series is slowly beginning to take on recognizable form. The sim's high-poly WWII aircraft and remarkably detailed new scenery required a complete rewrite of the *IL-2* game code and this apparently proved problematic for the revered Russian developer. Oleg isn't all that forthcoming with release dates or build status (the game doesn't even have a website), but his 16-person Moscow crew is working industriously toward a 2009 completion target.

When it does land, most insiders already agree *Storm of War: BoB* will be the WWII sim to own.



/// Harrier Jump Jet from *Jet Thunder*. ///

JET THUNDER: FALKLANDS/MALVINAS

DEV/PUB: THUNDER WORKS

www.thunder-works.com

This Brazilian/Argentinean collaboration will feature an historical treatment of the 1982 Falklands war complete with Harrier jump jets and Exocet-laden Super Etendard strike fighters. The dev team have extended the sim's release deadline numerous times, but most fans are hopeful the recently out-of-beta project will find a motivated distribution partner soon. Fans can also expect a playable demo before the end of 2008.

RISE OF FLIGHT

DEV/PUB: NEOQB

www.riseofflight.com

Canvas biplane enthusiasts haven't seen a worthwhile WWI fighter-plane game since the glory days of Red Baron, so this sharp-looking Russian import could fill a Sopwith Camel-sized void. Featuring numerous detailed aircraft models and over 125,000 square kilometers of navigable 3D terrain, the game may even be in stores by the time you read this. ☒



/// Classic biplane fighters from *Rise of Flight*. ///

VITALE: EMAIL: SIMCOLUMN@PCGAMER.COM
FIVE GAMES I'M PLAYING: IRACING.COM; GTR EVOLUTION; IL-2 STURMOVIK 1946; BATTLE OF BRITAIN 2; FALCON 4.0: ALLIED FORCE

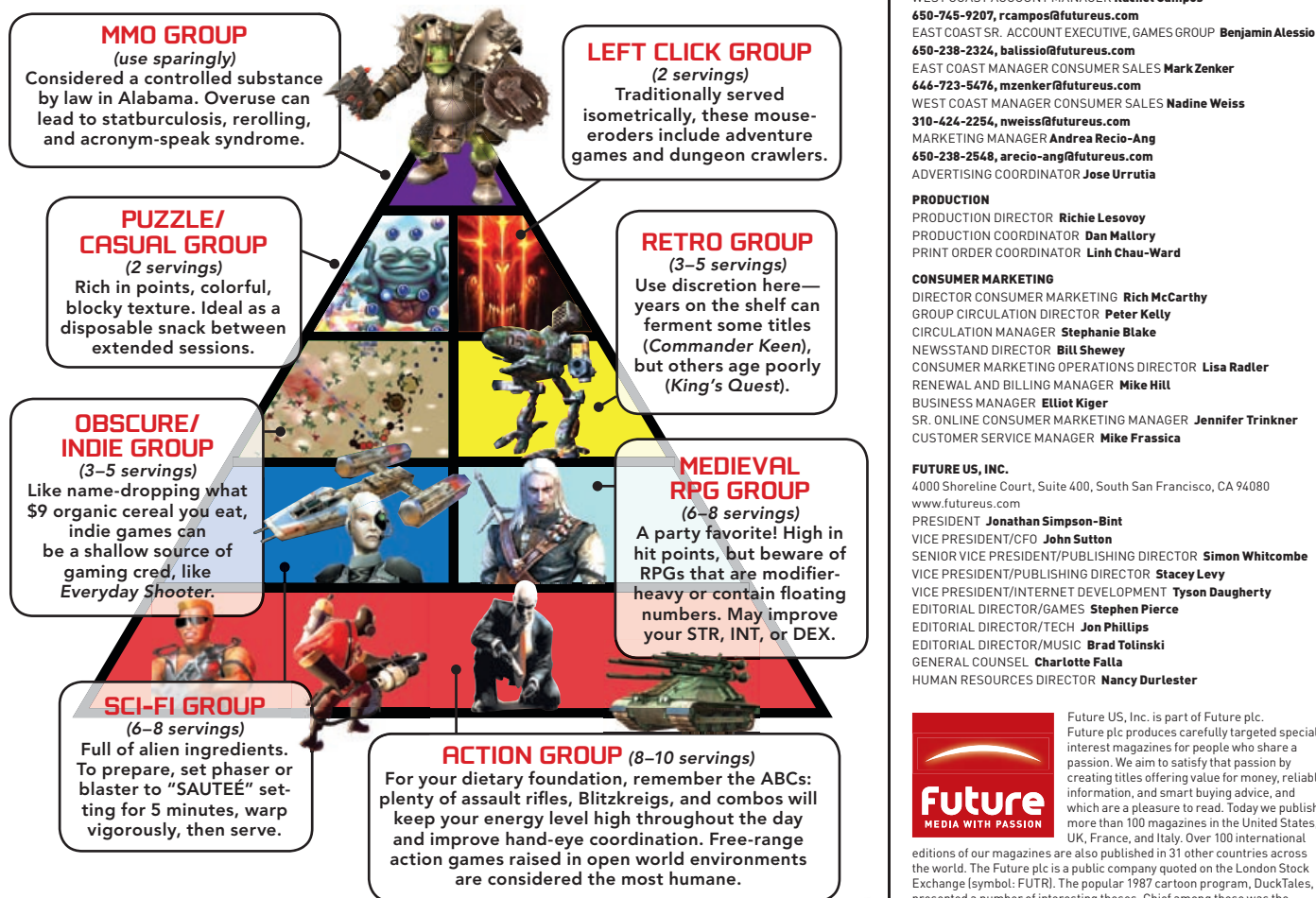
THE GAMER'S DIET

BASED ON A 2,000-HOUR-PER-YEAR REGIMEN

Don't worry—we wouldn't dream of promoting proper eating habits to gamers. Binge on Red Bull and BAWLS all you want; if you've found a way to sustain yourself on various jerky and foods that only end in "itos," then hats off to you.

We're more concerned about what your hard drive is digesting these days. How's your RPG intake? Is your GPU chewing at least 30 frames per second? Getting all your multiplayer minerals? Supping on well-balanced software is important; unmoderated MMO use can cause cleptootmania, and latest studies estimate that two out of five gamers have a co-op deficiency. For a better diet of discs and downloads, consult our PC gaming nutritional pyramid.

PYRAMID OF GAMING WELLNESS™



NEXT MONTH GAMES of 2009

Prep the guest room, put on some tea. Your old friends Jim Raynor, Johnny Gat, Alma, and Diablo are stopping by in 2009, along with some newcomers that we'll preview hands-on, like THQ's *Metro 2033* and Eidos' *Battlestations Pacific*.

PC GAMER

THE WORLD'S BEST-SELLING PC GAMES MAGAZINE

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FUTURE plc

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